The History and Development of Gestalt Therapy

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DIALOGUE RESPONDENT: EDWIN C. NEVIS

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The inevitability of identifying Gestalt therapy from one’s own perspective has resulted in multiple definitions of Gestalt therapy and widely differing historical accounts. The typical narrative of Gestalt therapy history can be summarized in Carlyle’s (Strouse & Strouse, 1993) famous maxim that all history is the biography of great men. The “great man” approach to history recounts the legend of a heroic figure (typically male) who individually changes the course of modern history, founds a school of thought, or introduces a new paradigm. In the history of Gestalt therapy, this approach details the contributions of Frederick Perls. Perls’s name has been virtually synonymous with Gestalt therapy, along with his famous “empty chair” technique.

Numerous problems plague these traditional historical accounts. Discoveries are glamorized and multiple contributors are ignored. Embarrassing moments are omitted and disciplines are protected at the expense of truth. These “Fritz Perls” accounts are ethnocentric, sexist, shallow, and historically ignorant. They have left Gestalt therapy cemented in the zeitgeist of 1960s popular psychology. Unfortunately, most historical accounts ignore the richness of Gestalt therapy theory as the confluence of many contributions, from physics to feminism, Hasidism to Taoism, and radical individualism to relational psychology, to name just a few. Therefore, this chapter will present the history of Gestalt therapy from a field-theoretical perspective, identifying contributions to Gestalt therapy from an array of cultural, scientific, historical, and aesthetic components of human experience.

The broadest overview of Gestalt therapy identifies a changing weltanschauung as responsible for Gestalt therapy’s development. Weltanschauung connotes more than the dictionary definition, “a shared worldview.” It is how we apprehend the world—how we are involved in it, perceive it, and bring our personal history to

EDWIN: My first response to your chapter, Charlie, was to remember what it was like for me personally to fall into the world of psychology as a student in 1944. I was 18 years old and waiting to be drafted into the military service. My professors in the Psychology Department of the City College of New York introduced us to Wundt, Brentano, Lewin, Koffka, Köhler, Wertheimer, etc. Then, as a teaching assistant, I designed experiments to test Lewinian hypotheses (e.g., the Zeigarnik effect) and had the opportunity to meet Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Goldstein, and others. I only realized years later how fortunate I was to have been in the presence of these pioneers and to have been exposed to them and their ideas. Imagine my delight about 7 years later to be introduced to Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, Isadore From, and Paul Goodman, and to be among the first to study with them as part of the founding group at the Cleveland Institute. You cannot imagine the excitement we experienced as part of a revolutionary, somewhat underground movement that was to revise and perhaps replace psychoanalysis as a therapy of choice.

CHARLIE: Another area that I would be interested in hearing about, Edwin, is what relationship, if any, existed between Gestalt psychology—Lewin, Köhler, and the gang—and Buber’s approach (or reproach) towards psychotherapy. I am thinking, for instance, about any early connections between I-Thou and figure-ground.
bear on it. This collective perspective creates momentum and becomes an engine for change. In Gestalt therapy, the result has been movement (a) from deconstructive views of the world toward holistic models of existence; (b) from linear causality toward field theoretical paradigms; and (c) from an individualistic psychology toward a dialogical or relational perspective.

The following definition of Gestalt therapy reflects the influences of a field perspective on methodology:

Gestalt therapy is a process psychotherapy with the goal of improving one’s contact in community and with the environment in general. This goal is accomplished through aware, spontaneous and authentic dialogue between client and therapist. Awareness of differences and similarities [is] encouraged while interruptions to contact are explored in the present therapeutic relationship. (Bowman, 1998, p. 106)

This definition clearly outlines what a Gestalt therapist does in practice. Viewing the history of Gestalt therapy from a field theoretical perspective makes it possible to see how the various components in this definition have evolved. Understanding the changing weltanschauung adds texture and contour to an already colorful historical account of Gestalt therapy.

Gestalt therapy is celebrating over 50 years of existence, marking the publication of its first comprehensive text, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951, 1994, hereafter referred to as *Gestalt Therapy*), and the birth of the first professional training group, the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. Though Frederick Perls looms large as the father of Gestalt therapy in the “great man” perspective, he invented neither the theory nor the subject matter, as he acknowledged (Perls, 1969b). The seeds of Gestalt therapy were planted well in advance of Frederick Perls and have fully germinated into a comprehensive theory of psychotherapy and a philosophical foundation for living.

**EDWIN:** I don’t have any particular knowledge about the relationship between figure-ground and I-Thou in the thinking of the early folks. Buber was more focused on the interpersonal level than the intrapsychic one. I think of figure-ground as awareness phenomena and, as such, belonging to the early stages of contact.

With regard to the movement from Gestalt psychology to Gestalt therapy, I think this reflects the developing split between the practitioners and the scientists in the psychological world. In addition to Lewin’s movement toward social action issues, key books on personality theory from a Gestalt perspective were written by Andra Angyal and Fritz Heider. On a personal level, when my cohorts and I were exposed to Gestalt and field theory we were also encouraged to become practitioners who would change the world through our interventions. Only a handful of my age-group became Gestalt-oriented scientists (e.g., Leo Postman, Irvin Rock, and Mary Henle).

**CHARLIE:** Gestalt psychology was primarily relegated to Europe, while Gestalt therapy was germinated and flourished in the United States. I believe this was in part a result of the medical/psychiatric system established in the United States. A Veterans Administration position was a good-paying job for a psychologist or psychotherapist, as was an academic appointment. Gestalt therapy and theory made significant contributions in each realm. In an academic setting one would certainly have found Goodman. Likewise, in a clinical setting one would certainly have heard of the efficiency and success of this new form of therapy and, of course, of Dr. Perls. I am curious, Edwin, how this academic-clinical cleavage appeared to you as you moved from college to career.

**EDWIN:** The cleavage between academic and practitioner roles was just beginning, and effort developed to keep it from spreading. The concept of the “scientist/practitioner” was developed and continues to be advocated
FOUNDATIONS OF GESTALT THERAPY

An acquaintance with some of the early contributors in psychoanalysis, psychology, and philosophy only partially illuminates the theory labeled "Gestalt" in 1951. Victorian Europe, the dramatic impact of fascism and world war, the denouement of 1960s liberalism, and the subsequent conservative shift have all interacted to shape the landscape of Gestalt therapy.

THE DESCENT OF GESTALT THERAPY IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

That Freud was a product of Victorian Europe and of nineteenth-century science needs no exegesis. Psychoanalytic theory was a revolutionary method for treating the ailments of a repressed and conservative society. Although Freud clearly identified society as responsible for these ills, his was not a social psychology; his enterprise was clearly medical. William Harvey's On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals (1628/1993) had set the standard for medical research some 200 years earlier: Organismic functioning could be ascertained through dissection. Freud's advice to aspiring psychoanalysts illustrates his reliance on this model:

I cannot advise my colleagues too urgently to model themselves during psychoanalytic treatment on the surgeon, who puts aside all his feelings, even his human sympathy, and concentrates his mental forces on the single aim of performing the operation as skillfully as possible. (quoted in Stepansky, 1999, p. 1)

Psychoanalytic dissection allowed classification of psychological functioning—for example, id, ego, and superego. Freud's careful observations and high degree of skepticism lent scientific credence to his "discoveries," which astonished Victorian Europe and the safe culture that had developed in Vienna. The world was forever changed.

Psychoanalysis was the starting point for Frederick and Laura Perls. Although their first treatise, Ego, Hunger and Aggression (Perls, 1947/1969a), originally carried the subtitle A Revision of Freud's Theory and Method, terms such as mental metabolism, figure formation, gestalt/gestalten, organismic balance, zero point, holism, field theory, concentration therapy, face-to-face therapy, present-centered therapy, attending to the actual, undoing retroflections, body concentration, experience, and experiment clearly indicated their departure. The 1969 Random House edition replaced the work's original subtitle with The Beginning of Gestalt Therapy and added, following Frederick Perls's name, the dubious credential "Associate Psychiatrist of the Esalen Institute."

Laura Perls authored two of the chapters in Ego, Hunger and Aggression (Rosenfeld, 1978a). This fact is seldom mentioned. Her interest in oral resistances and Fritz Perls's theory of dental aggression grew from her experiences of feeding and weaning her children (her phenomenological field). The book emerged from collaborative discussions between Frederick and Laura Perls. Although she was never cited as a coauthor, Frederick nominally acknowledged her contributions in the first edition of the book. This acknowledgment was deleted in the 1969 Random House edition.

today. However, the cleavage continued. It became a source of great conflict within the American Psychological Association. But it led to clinicians being elected as president of the APA and the growth of independent schools of professional psychology that grant a Doctor of Psychology degree, as opposed to the PhD, which remains a research/academic degree.
The Perlses’ departure from psychoanalysis began when Frederick Perls presented a paper at the 1936 Czechoslovakia Psychoanalytic Congress in Marienbad, disputing the “anal stage” of development as the origin of all resistance. The Perlses’ theory of dental aggression was viewed as heresy and was summarily dismissed. This led the Perlses to reconsider their contributions as revisionist and ultimately to organize the new school of Gestalt therapy.

The “great man” account of the debacle of the 1936 Congress pitted Frederick Perls against Sigmund Freud and the orthodox psychoanalysts. Actually, Marie Bonaparte was the most outspoken critic of Perls’s presentation of oral resistances. Later, as the figure of a new psychotherapy began to emerge, Frederick Perls (1947/1969a) said,

I had studied with a number of psycho-analysts for years. With one exception—K. Laundauer—all those from whom I have derived any benefit have departed from the orthodox lines. . . . This proves, on the one hand, the tremendous stimulation which emanated from Freud but, on the other, it proved the incompleteness or insufficiency of his system. . . . While I was living entirely in the psycho-analytic atmosphere, I could not appreciate that the great opposition to Freud’s theories might have some justification. (p. 81)

Frederick and Laura Perls studied psychoanalysis formally with first-generation analysts. The impact of these analysts is evident in the development of Gestalt therapy. Although Freud would marginalize many of his students for their challenge to the orthodoxy of classical analysis, the stage was set for alternatives to flourish. Rank was exploring the role of the “here and now” in the psychoanalytic setting, while Adler was exploring the role of paradox in therapy. Federn was developing preliminary concepts around ego boundaries, and Ferenczi was championing the active involvement of the analyst and emphasizing the subjective nature of interpretation. The renegade analyst who most directly contributed to Gestalt therapy was assuredly Wilhelm Reich.

Frederick Perls was in analysis with Reich and was attracted to a concept that would later develop into a central tenet of Gestalt therapy: organismic self-regulation. Further, Gestalt therapy borrowed heavily from Reich’s general theory of “character armor.” And Reich inadvertently made another major contribution to Gestalt therapy—bringing Paul Goodman into the fold. Commenting on Reich’s work, Goodman (1945/1977c) published “The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud” in the journal Politics, and Frederick Perls was eager to meet the author upon arriving in Manhattan in 1946 (Stoehr, 1994).

Paul Goodman was more than interested in Reich. He was a patient of Alexander Lowen (one of Reich’s students), and was an outspoken proponent of the same libertarian/anarchistic politics. Reich had completely abandoned his work on character and motoric involvement in psychoanalysis in favor of his discovery of the “orgone.” Although this proved a deathblow to Reich, it was fortuitous for Gestalt therapy. “In effect Reich had left the field to them [Perls and Goodman] and it was only necessary to clear the way to their own higher ground” (Stoehr, 1994, p. 45).

Gestalt therapy generally owes Freud, and the revolution he established, a debt of gratitude. Frederick Perls (1969c) expressed that gratitude in his autobiography:

Freud, his theories, his influence are much too important for me. My admiration, bewilderment, and vindictiveness are very strong. I am deeply moved by his suffering and courage. I am deeply awed by how much, practically all alone, he achieved with the inadequate mental tools of association psychology and mechanistically-oriented philosophy. I am deeply grateful for how much I developed standing up against him. (p. 45)
Likewise, Goodman’s debt of gratitude to Freud is measured in his comments dated September 24, 1939:

The friendly man, our general friend, is dead. Now without a possible addition, in books we read his careful conjectures, first persuasive to the heart surprised, then recognized for even very true. He proved freedom and good conscience to all men (most to those who say the contrary but will be freed tomorrow). First he explored the flowery fields of hell, then the fierce deserts of heaven. An unfinished enterprise. His achievement is to be achieved. (quoted in Goodman, 1945/1977a, p. 6)

THE DESCENT OF GESTALT THERAPY
IN EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Wilhelm Wundt’s (1874/1999) publication of The Principles of Physiological Psychology introduced the rigors of scientific inquiry and established psychology as a science. He defined psychology as the investigation of conscious processes, casting issues of mind and body back into the realm of philosophy. His aim was the reformation of psychological investigation, and his ammunition was the introduction of the experimental method. Though indirect, Wundt’s impact on Gestalt therapy was profound, shaping the development of all psychological investigation and of psychotherapy specifically.

Freud’s attempts to refine psychoanalysis as a method of scientific inquiry failed. Wundt’s effort succeeded, launching the discipline of experimental psychology and gaining acceptance in the scientific community. For Gestalt therapy, its effects would be both beneficial and insidiously detrimental. The spirit and thoroughness of Wundt’s inquiry into conscious processes benefited Gestalt therapy methodologically (as in the Gestalt therapeutic experiment). But the changing zeitgeist of the late nineteenth century, marked by a conservative return to focused models of psychotherapy and the precise measurement of outcome and symptom alleviation, has revealed the more detrimental influence of this scientific approach to therapy.

The same year that Wundt’s posthumous works were published, Franz Brentano (1874/1999) released Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint. His was a psychology sustaining philosophical roots yet building upon scientific method. Brentano and his students emphasized the unbiased description of inner experience as the basis of a scientific psychology. A student of Brentano, Christian von Ehrenfels, published “On Gestalt Qualities” (“Über “‘Gestaltqualitaten””) (1890/1988) and coined the term Gestalt in developing a general theory of complex perception. The Gestalt school of psychology was born.

Gestalt psychology is generally remembered for the idea that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Actually, the original wording, in a 1909 manuscript by Alexius Meinong, was “A thing is given in perception as the Gestalt quality of a sum of perceived characters” (quoted in Mulligan & Smith, 1988, p. 129). Kurt Lewin, a later descendant of the Brentanian school and student of Carl Stumpf, applied this idea to the mind, conceiving it as an amalgam of weak and strong Gestalten in constant communication. Lewin is a prominent figure in Gestalt therapy because of his development of field theory, action research, and systems dynamics.

In 1912, another student of Stumpf, Max Wertheimer, published his studies of perceptual grouping and the perception of movement. Together with Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler,
they were considered “the Berlin school” of Gestalt psychology. In contrast to von Ehrenfels’ work, which still relied upon reducing mental phenomena to elements, their work was revolutionary in identifying perception as a holistic process. The Berlin school attracted a number of students interested in a wide array of scientific endeavors. Among them were Kurt Lewin, Kurt Goldstein, and a doctoral student, Lore Posner (later, Laura Perls).

To identify Kurt Goldstein as a Gestalt psychologist is to dramatically understate his contributions to many fields in science and the humanities. Goldstein’s astounding work The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man (1939/1995) addressed not only his primary field of neurology but also the application of the phenomenological method in science, the generalizability of Gestalt perceptual psychology to the entire human condition, and the place of philosophy in medicine. His work challenged the linear, atomistic zeitgeist in science that suggested that theory formation based on empirical data would by itself lead to an adequate representation of reality. Studying the recovery of function after brain injury led him to realize “that only a method that placed the total organism of the individual in the foreground—in our interpretation of normal functioning or disturbances due to a defect—could be fruitful” (pp. 17–18).

Goldstein diverged from the Berlin school of Gestalt psychology in both the scope and the applicability of their concepts. Like Reich, Goldstein contributed to Gestalt therapy not only by synthesizing theory but also by connecting significant people. While completing her PhD in Gestalt psychology, Lore Posner studied for several years in Frankfurt at the Kurt Goldstein Center, where she met Frederick Perls, who was working at that time for Goldstein in his laboratory. Frederick Perls wed Lore Posner in 1929 (she would later anglicize her name to Laura). An exiled Goldstein would later seek a tutor in New York City to improve his English; the tutor would be Paul Goodman (Stoehr, 1994).

Several central tenets of Gestalt therapy are figural in this historical foray thus far. First is the Reichian concept of organismic self-regulation and the role of motoric functioning in psychotherapy. Second are Goldstein’s concepts of the organism as a whole and the plasticity of the human organism in adapting to the environment in the face of adversity. Finally, from Lewin’s work Gestalt therapy assimilated the concepts of the inseparability of the organism in the environment and the field theoretical perspective. The rigors of Wundtian investigation and Brentano’s “act psychology” would provide sound methodological processes.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, science was clearly established as the method of choice for many endeavors traditionally considered philosophical. It was the weltanschauung in virtually all fields of investigation. But by the middle of the twentieth century, science itself was shifting. In the physical sciences, field theory was gaining recognition in concordance with the study of atomic structure. Einstein’s theories of the interplay of time, matter, and energy were widely publicized. In this atmosphere, Goldstein’s and Lewin’s ideas also gained recognition. The weltanschauung was changing from atomism to the holistic concepts prevalent today.

While the Perlses were living in South Africa, their interest in holism was heightened by their exposure to the philosophical, scientific, and political ideas of Prime Minister Jan Christian Smuts, as exemplified in his book Holism and Evolution (1926/1996):

Holism . . . underlies the synthetic tendency in the universe, and is the principle that makes for the origin and progress of wholes in the universe. . . . [T]his whole-making or holistic tendency is fundamental in nature . . . [and] has a well-marked ascertainable
character. . . Evolution is nothing but the gradual development and stratification of progressive series of wholes, stretching from the inorganic beginnings to the highest levels of spiritual creation. (p. v)

Today we understand that human health depends upon the interdependence of systems and that the delicate balance of nature depends on every aspect of the biosphere. In Gestalt therapy, we understand that "lives and collective systems intertwine and need to be considered together as a unified field" (Parlett, 1997, p. 16, emphasis in original). One could say that linear, atomistic investigation can reveal correlations but not causality.

THE DESCENT OF GESTALT THERAPY IN PHILOSOPHY

Before detailing the foundations of an aesthetically based psychotherapy, it is worthwhile to understand the consequences of maintaining these foundations during the current zeitgeist of conservatism. The insidious influence of Wundt’s experimental psychology on Gestalt therapy can be seen in the approach to psychotherapy as a system, based on clinical epidemiology and evidence. As Haggblom et al. (2002) have noted, “The discipline of psychology underwent a remarkable transformation during the twentieth century, a transformation that included a shift away from the European influenced philosophical psychology of the late 19th century to the empirical, research-based, American dominated psychology of today” (p. 139). But Laura Perls (1992a) has affirmed that “[t]he basic concepts of Gestalt therapy are philosophical and aesthetic rather than technical. Gestalt therapy is an existential-phenomenological approach and as such it is experiential and experimental” (p. 4). In an age where providers benefit from joining the pharmaceutical and third-party industries in delivering cost-based therapy, the philosophy of Gestalt therapy and of psychotherapy in general is in jeopardy.

The philosophical heritage of Gestalt therapy is simply too rich to ignore. Laura Perls’s academic training included several years of study with Paul Tillich and thorough grounding in the philosophy of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Husserl, and Scheler. She was also a student of Martin Buber and saw no conflict between the philosophy of Tillich, a German Protestant, and that of Buber, a German Jew and scholar of Hasidic Judaism. In fact, the similarities she found—in ideas of contact and presence—are cornerstones of Gestalt therapy (Rosenfeld, 1978a).

Laura Perls had met Edmund Husserl and studied his work on phenomenological reduction with Tillich. Husserl’s phenomenological method would evolve into a solid foundation for Gestalt therapy methodology. Husserl was a student of Brentano, and Laura and Frederick Perls were exposed to their philosophies while working and studying with Goldstein. The weltanschauung allowed for the integration of philosophy and science, creating a breadth of

EDWIN: You position your thesis in relation to weltanschauung, and I want to elaborate on this. We Gestalt students were drawn to the approach not only because of the theory and method but also because of the implicit belief that we were going to change the world for the better. In the midst of a worldwide climate supporting democratic models, as opposed to authoritarian models, we saw a way to help liberate the restricted, conforming individual and to promote authenticity and individuality. As the third oldest Gestalt practitioner still alive (Erv Polster is a few years older than me), I must own up to having used the Gestalt approach to teach the people who created the liberation movements of the 1960s. But keep in mind that
attitude and affording abundant possibilities for the development of an existentially and phenomenologically based psychotherapy.

Frederick Perls was familiar with the philosophers referenced above, though only marginally so in comparison to Laura. He was, however, fascinated by the work of Salomo Friedlander. An obscure figure in philosophy, Friedlander (1918, cited in Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993, p. 5) posited a “zero-point” from which differences can emerge. Wulf (1996) acknowledged the compatibility of Friedlander’s concepts with the figure-ground formulations of the Gestalt psychologists, Goldstein’s homeostatic principles, and Eastern philosophy. For Gestalt therapy, Friedlander’s philosophy would contribute to a method of integrating polarities, the concept of the “fertile void,” and a more thorough understanding of the emergent gestalt. His philosophy of what he called “creative indifference” “eventually clarified for Frederick Perls Goldstein’s term ‘self-actualization’ (used by Maslow thirty years later)” (Kogan, 1976, p. 241).

Paul Goodman, an itinerant man of letters, was well versed in philosophy and brought Aristotelian ideas into early Gestalt therapy. Crocker (1999) explains that Goodman made powerful connections between his studies with the American Aristotelian scholar Richard McKeon and the theory of perception posited in Gestalt Therapy. Isadore From was an acquaintance of Goodman who sought psychotherapy from Frederick Perls in 1946 after moving to New York City to study philosophy at the New School for Social Research (Rosenfeld, 1978b). From’s love of philosophy would become his chalice for Gestalt therapy theory. The New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy was just being founded, and the philosophical basis of Gestalt therapy would be asserted and maintained there by Isadore From and Laura Perls until their deaths in 1990 and 1994, respectively. In the vernacular of “great man” historical accounts, if Frederick Perls was the father of Gestalt therapy, Laura Perls was certainly the first lady and Isadore From the dean of the school. From would earn this title not only because of the precision of his teaching and his devotion to Gestalt therapy theory but also because of Goodman’s abandonment of Gestalt therapy and ultimately his

I am a very conservative person, not a revolutionary. I am an organization consultant and a one-time faculty member of MIT. We just accepted Paul Goodman’s notion that a healthier individual would produce a more healthy society. Frederick Perls was mainly bent on changing psychoanalysis; whereas Goodman wanted to change society, and he saw what Fritz and Laura had created as a way of educating people.

CHARLIE: A weltanschauung of conservatism, unfortunately, leaves the liberation movement of the 1960s merely a historical glimmer in the sky. In many ways Goodman was as much the charismatic leader as Perls, and his radical approach to societal change was as costly to the growth of Gestalt therapy as Frederick Perls’s antics at Esalen in terms of mainstream acceptance. I know that you have thought and written extensively about this sort of “mainstream acceptance” and antithetical to Gestalt therapy. Do you believe that maintaining that boundary has been costly to Gestalt therapy as a social movement?

EDWIN: It probably has done just that, and numerous older Gestalt therapists have said that we have lost our creative thrust. I wonder if that is an inevitable development as movements mature. On the other hand, I see continued experimentation among practitioners in both the clinical and organizational field. If we look at the broader context of society as a whole, we can see both strong forces for conservatism (highly ascendant in the U.S. national government at this time) and strong liberation movements. For example, it would have been unheard of as recently as 10 years ago to see open public debate about marriage between people of the same sex.
untimely death in 1972 at age 61. (The third author of Gestalt Therapy, Ralph Hefferline, a professor of psychology at Columbia University, conducted the book’s Gestalt experiments with his students and recorded responses for use in the text. Once the book was published, Hefferline returned to behavioral psychology and maintained no ties with the Gestalt therapy community thereafter.)

The contributions of Martin Buber to Gestalt therapy deserve more discussion than can be offered here. Buber’s treatises on presence and mutuality addressed the problems of fascism and utilitarianism in the mid-1900s. The Gestalt therapy values of presence, authenticity, dialogue, and inclusion are beholden to Buber’s philosophy as outlined in I and Thou (1923/1958). Judith Brown (1980) summarized Buber’s I-Thou contribution to Gestalt therapy as “the goal of every intervention in Gestalt therapy” (p. 55). Citing Buber’s work as the most important influence on Gestalt therapy, Erhard Doubrawa (2001) identified the political implications of the I-Thou philosophy as a model for a utopian society and a remedy for social ills.

It was virtually de rigueur among intellectuals in the 1940s to be well versed in Eastern thought, which had an obvious influence on Gestalt therapy. Paul Goodman immersed himself in Eastern philosophical literature. Frederick Perls would later go to Japan to study Eastern philosophy firsthand. Their differing responses exemplify a pattern that would always split the onetime collaborators—one the thinker and scholar, the other the actor and doer.

Philosophy has offered Gestalt therapy a system of values and method. From Husserl came a framework for investigating experience through the phenomenological method; from Kierkegaard, the belief that truth is subjective; and from Heidegger, the idea that “being” (Dasein) is more fundamental than consciousness. An operational summary of these existential contributions informs us that passionate choices, strong convictions, and personal experience compose an individual’s “truth.”

Gestalt therapy’s roots in science and philosophy have given it the same flexibility and adaptability that the theory identifies in the human organism. “What has often gone unrecognized is the fact that because Gestalt therapy began with roots in both the research and experimental aspects of psychology as well as the more speculative, subjective approaches, it gained the strengths of each and thus has been able to avoid the pitfalls of the other” (Burley, 2001).

WORLD WAR AND THE RISE OF FASCISM

The rise of fascism, the Holocaust, and World War II were arguably the most influential factors in the development of Gestalt therapy since Freud and Breuer’s development of the “talking cure.” The list of indispensable contributors to Gestalt therapy who were forced to flee their homelands in search of safety and freedom from fascism is extensive—the Perlises, Buber, Lewin, Goldstein, Wertheimer, Koffka, Köhler, and Reich, to name but a few. Many lost entire families, and all lost loved ones and their worldly belongings. The trauma, impact, and magnitude of loss certainly dominated the weltanschauung of the World War II and post-war era. The profound impact of the Nazi empire and the suffering in its wake prompted two prominent Gestalt therapists, Cynthia Oudejans Harris and Gordon Wheeler, to translate into English The Collective Silence: German Identity and the Legacy of Shame, edited by Heimannsberg and Schmidt (1993).
Imagine the emotion and confusion associated with the terror of persecution coming after the prewar zeitgeist, which had been full of excitement and creativity. Wulf (1996) captured the zeitgeist of prewar Europe precisely:

Expressionism at this time represented a reaction to the old, outdated bourgeois norms and the naïve belief in progress. The catastrophes brought about by the First World War, the destruction of humanity, were only too evident and too recent. Expressionists . . . were trying to create a new vision of the human being, one determined by social responsibility and compassion for others. Creative art was seen as evolving out of immediate inner experiencing and emotional dynamics. The basic themes were feelings, intuition, subjectivity, fantasy—themes that live on in Gestalt therapy.

For the Perlises, the war years were a time of sharp contrasts. Prosperity in Germany, with ties to Laura’s wealthy family and thriving psychoanalytic practices, was followed by poverty and exile in Amsterdam. Flight to South Africa eventually brought prosperity once again with the reestablishment of their private practices and beginning the South African School for Psychoanalytic Studies in Johannesburg. They would experience a similar cycle again in Johannesburg with the juxtaposition of the creative freedom reminiscent of the prewar German Bauhaus culture and the subsequent flight to America in response to apartheid government. Frederick Perls had served in the German army as a medical corpsman in World War I and then as a psychiatrist in the South African army with the Allied Forces in World War II. Laura Perls moved from psychoanalyst to “washerwoman” and back. For the Perlises, these experiences affirmed the central role of Friedlander’s theory of the “zero-point” and Smuts’s views of holism and would later influence the Gestalt therapy theory of personality integration.

World War II proved a tipping point for Gestalt therapy, enriching the ground for a unified theory that would take form by 1951. It also produced what would become Gestalt therapy’s biggest challenge—American clinical psychology. The establishment of the Veterans Administration and the significant monies available meant that medical centers would dominate and bureaucratize psychological and psychotherapy practice in the United States.

The war brought enormous casualties and need for psychological healing, but the psychoanalytic treatment available was ineffective in treating family, interpersonal, or occupational problems. American pragmatism would seize the day as behaviorism proved more effective in treating “shell shock” and the host of traumas accompanying the war. Clinical psychology had a foundation of Wundtian experiment in academe—a good fit with the emerging system of diagnostics that characterized American medicine.

The anarchistic roots of Gestalt therapy created friction between Gestalt practitioners and these established systems in medicine and academe. A healthy skepticism toward bureaucracies, born in response to fascism, is a major contribution of Gestalt therapy. One unfortunate result, however, has been the perception of Gestalt therapy as antiacademic, anti-intellectual, and antiestablishment. Richard Kitzler, in a dialogue with Laura Perls and E. Mark Stern (Stern, 1992) has pointed out that some practitioners, with their reliance upon technique and little else, have contributed to this misunderstanding of Gestalt therapy as marginalized not by choice but by ignorance. It is difficult work (which some have avoided) to assimilate holistic, philosophical, and scientific foundations, especially when the culture shifts away from many of the values inherent in the system.
From its inception, Gestalt therapy has had larger sociocultural implications than its modern reputation would suggest. For many early contributors to Gestalt therapy, anarchy was an antidote to fascism and the key to a more utopian society. Martin Buber had strong ties with this political orientation, as did Franz Koffka and Jan Christian Smuts. Goodman was a notable leader of the anarchist movement in the United States. He remained active through the student protest movements of the 1960s, and made numerous political literary contributions to anarchist publications such as *Politics*.

In his final years, Frederick Perls would flee Nixon-era America, fearing that prevalent fascist trends would result in the destruction of civil society and the disappearance of the individual freedom that he had enjoyed there. Less of a political spokesman for anarchy than Goodman, Perls would realize his rather reclusive dream of a Gestalt kibbutz in 1969. In Cowichan, British Columbia, he started a community where participants lived together, learning Gestalt therapy principles while practicing interdependence and Perls’s own brand of utopian anarchy (Baumgardner & Perls, 1975; Shepard, 1975). Other influences (too numerous to list here) also deserve note in Gestalt therapy history—for instance, the contributions of John Dewey and William James from American psychology and the impact of theater and avant-garde culture. Many elements of the weltanschauung colored Gestalt therapy, and this new approach spread rapidly after *Gestalt Therapy* was published. The history of Gestalt therapy illustrates field theory in action—a basic and necessary component of the therapy itself (Parlett, 1997; Yontef, 1993).

**EVANGELIZING GESTALT THERAPY**

In 1953, Marjorie Creelman invited Erving Polster to attend a workshop led by Frederick Perls in Cleveland (Wysong, 1979). By 1955, the members from the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy who were conducting training in Cleveland included Paul Weiz, Laura Perls, Paul Goodman, and Isadore From. The New York Institute exported their collective teaching to an eager group of professionals seeking exciting alternatives to traditional psychotherapy training. In this way the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland began. The trainers for the first formal training program there in 1962 included Erving and Miriam Polster, Bill Warner, Richard Wallen, Sonia and Edwin Nevis, Joseph Zinker, Cynthia Harris, Rainette Fantz, Elaine Kepner, and Marjorie Creelman (Wysong, 1979). The program format evolved from weekend training to a “three-year intensive.” In turn, the Cleveland faculty presented Gestalt therapy initially in Chicago and Boston and later throughout the world. Two paradigms for training emerged. Training might be led by a single individual—often a charismatic leader embarking on a “traveling road show,”—or it might employ a faculty approach, exposing students to various styles of assimilated Gestalt therapy theory.

Ever restless and with a strong propensity to bask in the style of the charismatic leader, Frederick Perls began a circuit of training in Gestalt therapy after the Cleveland school was established. His initial groups in the late 1950s were primarily lay groups. He was disappointed with the minor impact of lay training in the field of psychotherapy. This changed when he acquired “training appointments” in Columbus State Hospital in Ohio and Mendocino State Hospital in California (Shepard, 1975).

Wilson van Dusen had arranged for the appointment in Mendocino, which ultimately resulted in Perls’s relocation to California and establishment of a training circuit on the West
Coast. By 1960 Perls was collaborating with James Simkin (one of his clinical psychology interns at William Allison White Institute and an early participant in the New York Institute group), and within a year two training groups were formed. The training institutes founded on the West Coast included the Gestalt Institute of San Francisco and the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. Like the Cleveland Institute staff, the training staff of the San Francisco and Los Angeles institutes (among them Walter Kempler, Robert Resnick, Janet Rainwater, Gary Yontef, Jerry Kogan, and Claudio Naranjo) carried word of Gestalt therapy to Mexico and South America and eventually around the world. Interest in Canada also grew as Harvey Freedman began training in Vancouver, British Columbia, in the early 1960s and then in Toronto with Harold Silver, Peter Brawley, and Jorge Rosner. Rosner and others would subsequently train Gestalt therapists in Scandinavia, Australia, and New Zealand (Solomon, 2000).

By the time Frederick Perls “settled” on the Pacific Rim in Big Sur, California, he reveled in his reputation as the founder of Gestalt therapy. Sales of Gestalt Therapy were steadily climbing and would exceed half a million copies by 1979 (Gaines, 1979). Perls appeared in popular magazines such as Time and Life and became a mainstay in the human potential movement—“Guru to the Hippies.” He was a celebrity at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur from 1964 to 1969, where he provided professional training in Gestalt therapy as well as his weekend “circus.” The “circuses” were large group demonstrations of Perls’s skill and Gestalt technique—creating a reputation that would prove most damaging to Gestalt therapy. Nonetheless, as Jerry Kogan (1976) noted,

This brilliant creation [Esalen] brought together thousands of people from all over the world, from street people to the most eminent men and women of letters and science. By 1965 the institute was the major center for humanistic psychology in America and by 1972 literally hundreds of growth centers through the United States and the world were operating on the Esalen model. (p. 253)

Renowned practitioners in various fields of human potential, including Alan Watts, Virginia Satir, Illana Rubenfeld, Ida Rolf, Will Schutz, and Sam Keen, were influenced by Perls at Esalen and contributed to Gestalt therapy without carrying its banner.

With the explicit goal of change and growth for “normals,” the human potential movement was the subject of much scrutiny. The concern centered on emotional contagion and accusations that Gestaltists were revivalistic—essentially quasi-religious. A string of outcome studies in the early 1970s called into question their effectiveness as serious change agents (Garfield & Bergin, 1971; Lieberman, Yalom, & Miles, 1973; Yalom, 1975). Expressing a growing sentiment in psychology, James Hillman (1975) diagnosed the problem as follows: “Perhaps it [humanism] is the dominant weltanschauung of the mid-twentieth century and as such conceals the dominant pathology of that period: manic euphoria” (p. 241).

For Gestalt therapy specifically, the most unfortunate effect of Frederick Perls’s circuses was a perception of Gestalt therapy as, ironically, significantly less than the sum of its parts. Gestalt therapy became known as a therapy of techniques, quick cures, or even gimmicks. It did not reflect Frederick Perls’s years of training and practice, his knowledge of medicine and psychoanalysis, or certainly his brilliance. Due to the growing publicity from its association with the Esalen Institute, Gestalt therapy was flourishing and well-known. But it was gaining very different types of recognition. There were the “Fritzers,” whom their opponents claimed followed Frederick Perls like groupies, introjecting each technique du jour as Perls explored
his own creativity. There was the New York Institute, maintaining staunch adherence to the original theory as outlined in Gestalt Therapy. There were various blends of "Gestalt and . . .," such as bioenergetics, transactional analysis, Buddhism, massage, and Jungian psychology.

Then there was the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, holding fast to well-designed educational experiences in their postgraduate and intensive training programs while exploring wide areas of application and bringing new, and sometimes controversial ideas into Gestalt therapy theory. The tradition of Gestalt therapy at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland has a strong foundation in Lewinian systems theory. This has sparked debate and research regarding the relationship between systems and field approaches. The Cleveland school pioneered the use of Gestalt therapy applications with interpersonal systems. Richard Wallen and Edwin Nevis were steeped in the work of Perls and Lewin—who by 1946 had spearheaded the beginnings of the NTL (National Training Laboratory) Institute in Bethel, Maine. Nevis and Wallen infused Gestalt training concepts, such as the "Gestalt cycle of experience," into the field of organization and systems development (Nevis, 1987). Joseph Zinker and Sonia Nevis have infused these structuralist ideas into their clinical work with couples and families, pioneering theory and practice with intimate systems.

Four very popular books of the 1970s came out of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (GIC) and remain popular in Gestalt therapy today. Erving and Miriam Polster published *Gestalt Therapy Integrated: Contours of Theory and Practice* in 1973. Their book emphasized that resistance in psychotherapy was not an inevitably pathological process but rather a process of creative adjustment. The book provided a sound, applicable theory for the process of personal growth and the experience of many in the human potential movement that "therapy is too good to be limited to the sick" (p. 7). The other highly readable book of the 1970s era that continues to enjoy popularity is Joseph Zinker's *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy* (1977). Acclaimed by *Psychology Today* as one of the best books of 1977, Zinker reintroduced Gestalt therapy as an infinitely creative encounter between therapist and client. Like his close friends the Polsters, he specifically outlined the place of the Gestalt experiment in therapeutic work. Finally, Joel Latner's *Gestalt Therapy Book* (1973) was an erudite and elegant description of the state of Gestalt therapy in 1973. Latner was one of the first graduates of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland.

After Frederick Perls died in 1970, these books did much to keep Gestalt therapy alive throughout the next decade and to cultivate the next generation of Gestalt therapists. Other lasting contributions included *Gestalt Therapy Now* (Fagan & Shepherd, 1970), *Gestalt Is* (Stevens, 1975), *The Growing Edge of Gestalt Therapy* (Smith, 1977), and a special issue of the American Psychological Association’s *Counseling Psychologist* (1974) dedicated to Gestalt therapy and edited by Joen Fagan.

Several associations played prominent roles in setting the direction of Gestalt therapy in this era, either through collaboration, as in the case of the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) and the American Group Psychotherapy Association, or by passive dissent, as in the case of the American Psychological Association. For example, AHP held special meetings for Gestalt therapists at its annual conferences in the 1970s and 1980s, out of which emerged the Gestalt Journal conferences. Perhaps the most significant professional relationship was that with the American Academy of Psychotherapists (AAP). As a result of the long-standing support of the academy, Ed Smith published a compendium of Gestalt articles that appeared in the academy’s professional journal, *Voices*, from 1967 through 1989.
manuscripts, photographs, early audiotapes, videotapes, and transcripts, side by side with the early equipment itself. Ansel Woldt has oversight of the Kent State collection, where he has also amassed the largest collection of academic dissertations on Gestalt therapy in the world and has served as the chair for 101 doctoral dissertations, most of them on some aspect of Gestalt therapy. From the “Gloria tapes,” early videotapes that captured demonstrations of Frederick Perls, Carl Rogers, and Albert Ellis, to the creative work of Liv Estrup and her noteworthy multimedia presentation What’s Behind the Empty Chair (2000), Gestalt therapists and institutions continue to explore digital, video, and distance learning technology as a relevant part of teaching and therapy.

Internet communication is dramatically increasing opportunities for contact and the further development of Gestalt therapy. Gestalt Global Corporation (www.g-gej.org/gestaltglobal/), chaired by Philip Brownell, hosts network resources, online and hard-copy publishing, discussion lists, innovative text-based technologies, and the online journal Gestalt! The growth of Gestalt therapy online has been remarkable:

In the time span between the first appearance on-line of Gestalt therapists in 1995 to the writing of an article in Gestalt Review discussing field effects associated with internet technology (Brownell, 1998) there was at least a 500% growth in the quantity of Gestalt sites on the world wide web. That took place in approximately a two-year span. In the two years following that, the growth has continued so that now the increase measures approximately 1000%. (Brownell, O’Neill, & Goodlander, 1999)

CONCLUSION

So what does the history of Gestalt therapy tell us about becoming a Gestalt therapist? The first and foremost requirement is an ethos founded in deep reverence for the profound effects of the meeting of two human beings. Next is a dedication to awareness and the development of a weltanschauung that is widely informed and thoroughly considered. Finally, intense study and a commitment to understanding earlier contributions to the discipline is required. To paraphrase Isadore From, Beethoven was a brilliant composer, and he knew his Mozart well.

It is possible to practice Gestalt therapy solely from a “here and now” perspective or to work essentially with a limited tool kit of Gestalt experiments, or even to limit the focus to the dialogical relationship. To use these parts of Gestalt therapy exclusively, however, is to

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CHARLIE: I couldn’t agree more! Therapists-in-training seldom think of the experience of sitting in the therapist’s chair in the consulting room 20 or 30 years from now. In my 20 years I have found Gestalt therapy continually renewing and lively for me as well as my clients. You mentioned beginning in 1944, Edwin. That’s 60 years of living with Gestalt therapy. Congratulations and thank you!
unnecessarily limit the power of the method and the breadth of the theory. Laura Perls identified the necessity for the Gestalt therapist to bring his or her whole self into the therapeutic situation: "Gestalt therapy is existential, experiential and experimental. But what techniques you use to implement that and apply it, that depends to the greatest extent on your background, on your experiences professionally, in life, your skills and whatever" (quoted in Rosenfeld, 1978a, p. 24).

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. In keeping with recent Gestalt theorists' focus on field theory, what were some of the cultural, theoretical, and historical elements present in the field as the early founders were constructing the principles of Gestalt therapy?

2. What were the contributions of Reich, Goldstein, Adler, and Lewin to the early central tenets of Gestalt theory?

3. Name Buber's notion that has been called "the goal of every intervention in Gestalt therapy" (Brown, 1980, p. 55), and the most important influence on Gestalt therapy and the remedy for social ills (Doubrawa, 2001). Describe how Buber's notion is useful, not only to Gestalt therapy theory, but also to the practice of Gestalt therapy.

4. Although the United States may have provided refuge to many contributors to Gestalt therapy theory during and following World War II, it also introduced some obstacles to the acceptance of the Gestalt approach among psychotherapists. What were some of those obstacles?

5. The 1960s and 1970s in the United States brought some unfortunate notoriety to Gestalt therapy, perhaps dimming its reputation as a viable psychotherapy approach. Name some of those events/circumstances and their influences on the reputation of Gestalt therapy theory.

**EXPERIENTIAL PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITIES**

**ACTIVITY 1:** As described in this chapter, theory development is contextual and often dependent on chance meetings and collaborations. Design a time line of your own life, noting the contexts, events, and serendipitous circumstances and influences that have brought you to an interest in learning more about Gestalt therapy and theory.

**ACTIVITY 2:** Your chapter author describes the notion of the "great man" (or great woman) approach to history. In a small group or classroom setting, generate names of the "greats" in each decade who have made major contributions to world history in general. Discuss how those "greats" may also have influenced the development of psychological theories and practices, especially Gestalt therapy and theory.

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(Smith, 1991). Fifty-seven articles were reprinted, 33 of which had appeared in Voices in the 1970s. Several respected Gestalt therapists have maintained their connections with Gestalt therapy through the academy, among them Irma Lee Shepherd, Joen Fagan, Sol Rosenberg, and Smith himself.

**PUBLICATIONS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND PREDICTABLE ANARCHY**

Currently no fewer than 200 training institutions are devoted to Gestalt therapy worldwide. In keeping with their anarchistic roots, Gestalt institutions invariably self-destruct and reconstitute. Training institutes differentiate into new organizations as a result of theoretical differences, practical considerations, or personality conflicts. As Richard Kitzler said in the triologue with Laura Perls and E. Mark Stern, “Every organization ultimately dulls the charismatic call that quickened it. Integral to this process is bureaucracy as the organization wraps itself in the corruption of respectability” (Stern, 1992, p. 24).

In the late twentieth century, large membership organizations appeared that were devoted in one way or another to the propagation of Gestalt therapy. The Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT), the European Association for Gestalt Therapy (EAGT), Gestalt Australia New Zealand (GANZ), and the International Gestalt Therapy Association (IGTA) are prominent examples. There are corresponding examples in Mexico, South America, Russia, Germany, and Scandinavia, to name but a few. The most comprehensive list of associations, institutes, and journals is available in Appendix A (this volume) and on the World Wide Web at the Gestalt Therapy Megalist (http://enabling.org/ia/gestalt/gpass.html). The lively struggle that characterizes a Gestalt organization’s search for novelty and contact guarantees that these organizations will continue to reconfigure themselves in the spirit of anarchical development.

The *Gestalt Journal* premiered in 1978 and was the first journal dedicated exclusively to Gestalt theory and practice. The *British Gestalt Journal* was founded in 1991, and today there are 11 professional journals in English alone. There are also hundreds of book titles. In 1991 Gordon Wheeler published *Gestalt Reconsidered*, calling into question the operationalization of several fundamental theoretical concepts of Gestalt therapy. In addition to eliciting significant responses (e.g., Yontef, 1992), this work ushered in a new era of authors collaborating and debating Gestalt therapy. The Gestalt International Study Center (GISC), founded by Edwin and Sonia Nevis, and the *Gestalt Review*, edited by Joseph Melnick, have dedicated significant resources to developing the body of Gestalt literature and research in a wide array of social, political, and professional applications.

**INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY AND THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY**

Since the 1960s, Gestalt therapy has used cutting-edge technology, evidenced by the early recording equipment that can be found at the Frederick and Laura Perls’s Special Collections at the Kent State University Library Archives in Kent, Ohio. These Gestalt Archives contain
manuscripts, photographs, early audiotapes, videotapes, and transcripts, side by side with the early equipment itself. Ansel Woldt has oversight of the Kent State collection, where he has also amassed the largest collection of academic dissertations in Gestalt therapy in the world and has served as the chair for 101 doctoral dissertations, most of them on some aspect of Gestalt therapy. From the "Gloria tapes," early videotapes that captured demonstrations of Frederick Perls, Carl Rogers, and Albert Ellis, to the creative work of Liv Estrup and her noteworthy multimedia presentation *What’s Behind the Empty Chair* (2000), Gestalt therapists and institutions continue to explore digital, video, and distance learning technology as a relevant part of teaching and therapy.

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