

# *Developing* Gestalt Counselling



Series Editor: Windy Dryden

Jennifer Mackewn



# DEVELOPING GESTALT COUNSELLING

A field theoretical and relational  
model of contemporary Gestalt  
counselling and psychotherapy

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Jennifer Mackewn



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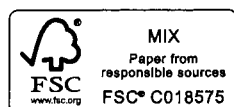
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## Preface

This book has been written with three aims in mind. Firstly, I hope to provide a view of contemporary integrative Gestalt which will go some way to offset and counterbalance the oft repeated and sometimes reductionist descriptions of Fritz Perl's demonstration work in the 1960s. The Gestalt approach to counselling and therapy has been consistently misrepresented and misunderstood by people who have not differentiated between Gestalt and 'Perlsism' (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993; Dublin, 1977). Contemporary integrative Gestalt is a complex intersubjective approach based in phenomenological field theory. I especially want to convey how flexible and adaptable Gestalt can be, allowing the practitioner to incorporate all manner of ideas and insights from other forms of therapy and from different fields of expertise, within the integrative frame of field theory. Gestalt is not, at heart, a matter of developing new tricks and techniques but of creatively adapting the approach and the practitioner to meet the other person or people where they are available for meeting.

Secondly, I have attempted to meet a need for an overview of contemporary integrative Gestalt. In recent years many counsellors, psychotherapists and trainees have approached me saying that they know Gestalt has evolved and developed enormously since the 1960s but they have found it hard to get a comprehensive sense of its evolution. To gather relevant and necessary information about contemporary Gestalt (as opposed to Perlsian 1960s Gestalt which still predominates in the minds of many) they have had to find and read material from a wide range of sources, not all of which are easy to get hold of or absorb. This book integrates many of the important developments of the last decade.

Thirdly, I have wished to provoke some new thinking within the field of counselling and therapy. In this context I am proposing a model of counselling and therapy as complex processes which are not linear in nature but iterative, recursive and spiralling – see the Introduction. I am also suggesting that counselling and therapy need to go beyond individualism, beyond even human intersubjectivity and address issues of the field in which we live – our interdependence with the natural world, our responsibilities for the economic and cultural conditions of our times as well as our responsibilities towards the other species which co-habit our earth.

In tune with most other Western developments of the century, counselling and psychotherapy have persistently recommended a 'person-centred' approach. The result is that we human beings now participate predominantly with other humans and with human made technologies and experiences. Most of us have lost a sense of our interdependent place in the universe. This is a precarious situation both for our survival as a species and for our psychological health. We have become estranged from the animate earth (Abram, 1996). We need connection and contact with the elements of earth, sky, water, fire and a lived sense of relationship to rocks, trees, flowers and wild creatures in order to live meaningful, sustainable lives.

Counselling and psychotherapy do not seem to have fulfilled their early promise. Far from improving the world, we have had a hundred years of psychotherapy and the world is getting worse. Indeed psychotherapy and counselling may have contributed to the fostering of a narcissistic culture (Lasch, 1979) which emphasises the rights of individuals without fully taking account of their responsibilities and the entitlements of other peoples, cultures, species and life forms or indeed of the earth herself. Counselling and psychotherapy have undoubtedly helped many individuals but they have also upset many individuals and bypassed many more.

Above all, therapeutic counselling has contributed relatively little to the care of the world or the interaction between individuals and the ecological, social and economic conditions of our times. Counselling and psychotherapy have emphasised the hurts which older generations and society have inflicted and they have shown some useful ways that individuals can alleviate these wounds. But they have offered little guidance about how we can tend the wounds of society, of our ancestors or of the world.

Gestalt is perhaps uniquely placed to redress this imbalance because of its emphasis upon field theory and existential phenomenology. I propose that contemporary integrative Gestalt offers a different basis for counselling and psychotherapy. It does not emphasise the person but the person in context. It places as much emphasis upon the environment or field as upon the person coming for counselling. Field theory shows how we are shaped by our environment but it also indicates how we individually contribute towards shaping our environment and are responsible in many respects for choosing our reality. It invites us to experience our interdependence with the world and challenges us to feel our responsibility for the field conditions in which we live. It therefore seems a useful approach to counselling at a time when the ecological balance of the world is immediately threatened and a continued emphasis upon 'humanistic' and 'person-centred' approaches is proving fatal to many species and habitats and is likely to be fatal to the human species as well.

Existential phenomenology suggests that there is not one but many realities, not one but many perspectives, not one but many truths. It reminds us of the inherent subjectivity of any one person's view and the humbling limits of our human perceptions. It opens us to multiple levels of reality, reconnects us to the direct sensuous nature of our bodily experience and puts us back in touch with the interdependent world. Only through such lived experience of interconnection can we start living as one of earth's animals, equally conscious of our responsibilities as of our rights.

*Developing Gestalt Counselling and Psychotherapy* makes no claims for being either authoritative or comprehensive. Rather, what I have set out to do is outline the various areas which I feel have been under- or misrepresented in the general books published on Gestalt so far. It is inevitably a subjective view of the Gestalt approach even though tempered by the subjective comments of the many colleagues and trainees who have been kind enough to read and help me with the typescripts.

The book can be read as a whole, but it is equally intended to be treated as a reference and a support, to be dipped into at different places. Each section is fairly complete in itself and is amply cross-referenced so I hope you will feel free to pick and choose to meet your needs and follow your interests. I hope you enjoy the book and find it of use.

## Acknowledgements

This book is not in any way an isolated entity and cannot be understood in isolation but only as an interactive part of the whole field from which it has emerged. It has evolved through my interdependent experiences with many other people, situations and creatures and I would like to acknowledge and appreciate the wonderful teachings and support that I have received from all of these.

In particular this book could not have been written without the active as well as background support of my partner, Philip Raby and the tolerance of my children and friends. I would also like to offer my warmest thanks and appreciation to my patient and unflappable secretary and assistant, Michelle Challifour, whose help has been invaluable at all times.

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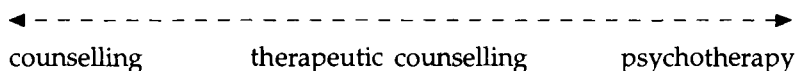
My thanks to the trainees with whom I have worked. This book is written because of you and for you. Your interests, feedback, searching questions, humorous affection and challenges have been a constant source of nourishment and inspiration. I appreciate the generous support of the various organisations who have invited me to work with them and thus given me the opportunity to be in continual interaction with hundreds of trainees over many years. In particular I appreciate The Metanoia Trust, The Institute for the Arts in Therapy in Education, Gestalt South West, Roffey Park Management Institute.

Finally I thank the people who have come to me for counselling, psychotherapy or supervisory consultation in individual or group, private or organisational settings. The book could not have been written without you and your courage, your integrity, your sense of adventure, your willingness to keep going even when this felt hard. I dedicate the book to all of you – all of us – who are willing to risk ourselves and our self image in the adventure of honest exploration of self, soul and otherness, facing ourselves and our responsibilities in the world.

## Introduction: A field theoretical and relational model of contemporary integrative Gestalt

I address this book to counsellors and psychotherapists and trainee counsellors or psychotherapists of all orientations, and especially to those of you who are or wish to become Gestalt counsellors and psychotherapists; or who wish to integrate Gestalt into your current practice. The book is primarily designed for those who already have knowledge both of counselling and of Gestalt. However I have provided an optional section of this introduction on theoretical background (p. 14ff.) and I suggest that if you do not have any previous knowledge of Gestalt counselling and psychotherapy you might find it helpful to read this before the main body of the book.

Attempts to distinguish between counselling and psychotherapy are never wholly successful (Nelson-Jones, 1982) and rarely satisfy the professionals concerned. Indeed Truax and Carkhuff (1967) have argued that the terms can be – and frequently are – used interchangeably. For the purposes of this book, I shall follow the lead of Clarkson and Carroll (in Clarkson and Carroll, 1993) and use counselling and psychotherapy to mean two interrelated disciplines with substantial overlap or as two stages on a continuum of therapeutic counselling.



The book may thus be considered to be exploring the continuum of Gestalt counselling, therapeutic counselling *and* psychotherapy; and I alternate randomly between the words counsellor and therapist.

### **A field theoretical and relational model of integrative Gestalt**

This book describes a relational and field theoretical model of contemporary integrative Gestalt counselling and psychotherapy. The model presented suggests that counselling is a complex



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process which requires the counsellor/psychotherapist to be intuitive, self aware and in touch with their bodily and emotional selves. Yet at the same time therapeutic counselling involves a number of interrelated component tasks which require counsellors and psychotherapists to develop a wide range of knowledge and skills and an ability to envisage what they are doing and why in terms of several conceptual frameworks, as well as to meet their clients person to person in a meaningful relationship and blend the component skills into a subtle and versatile art form.

The component aspects of Gestalt counselling and psychotherapy include:

- Attending to beginnings and initial conditions (Part I);
- Understanding and exploring the holistic field, while appreciating the paradoxical theory of change (Part II);
- Developing a dialogic relationship as the crucible for self development (Part III);
- Observing process and developing diagnostic perspectives from these observations. Differentiating different styles of making and moderating contact in the relationship and evolving therapeutic strategies in the light of such diagnostic perspectives (Part IV and Appendix 2);
- Exploring awareness and contact (Part V);
- Integrating creative, experimental and transpersonal dimensions (Part VI);
- Working with body process, energy, resistance and impasse (Part VII);
- Attending to support and background processes in clients' lives: exploring life themes and internalisation processes (Part VIII);
- Shaping counselling over time: shaping the overall counselling process while remaining open to the immediacy of the spontaneous moment (Part IX).

Each of these component aspects of therapeutic counselling can of course be subdivided into further complex systems of skills which interact with all the other aspects. The component tasks and skills of Gestalt counselling and therapy are not separate but inherently interdependent. They are interwoven and cannot be understood or meaningfully practised in isolation from each other but only as essential aspects of the whole; for one of the most important concepts of Gestalt is the notion of the whole, which cannot be broken without destroying its very nature. Describing the Gestalt

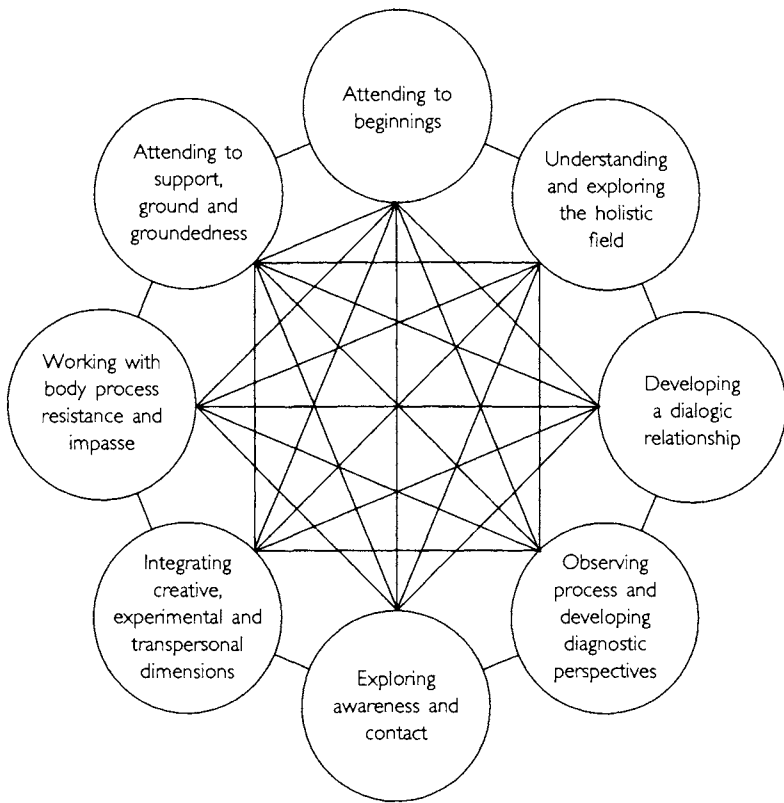


Figure I.1 *Interrelated component tasks of Gestalt counselling and psychotherapy*

approach therefore poses a challenge which is intrinsic and peculiar to any holistic approach: an understanding of any one aspect of the theory and practice of Gestalt counselling and therapy presupposes and requires a simultaneous understanding of the other aspects and indeed of the whole. Figures I.1 and I.2 attempt to capture the holistic spirit of the Gestalt approach to counselling and therapy by illustrating diagrammatically how all of the component tasks listed above are interconnected and form a whole.

Certain of these aspects or tasks of counselling and psychotherapy will be more present or in focus at certain times and so will organise the counselling work at that time. But all other aspects of counselling are also always present and being worked on to some degree. A field theoretical and relational model of

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Attending to beginnings	Attending to beginnings	Attending to beginnings	Attending to beginnings	Attending to beginnings	Attending to beginnings	Attending to beginnings
Exploring the holistic field	Exploring the holistic field	Exploring the holistic field	Exploring the holistic field	Exploring the holistic field	Exploring the holistic field	Exploring the holistic field
Developing a dialogic relationship	Developing a dialogic relationship	Developing a dialogic relationship	Developing a dialogic relationship	Developing a dialogic relationship	Developing a dialogic relationship	Developing a dialogic relationship
Observing process developing diagnostic perspectives	Observing process developing diagnostic perspectives	Observing process developing diagnostic perspectives	Observing process developing diagnostic perspectives	Observing process developing diagnostic perspectives	Observing process developing diagnostic perspectives	Observing process developing diagnostic perspectives
Exploring awareness and contact	Exploring awareness and contact	Exploring awareness and contact	Exploring awareness and contact	Exploring awareness and contact	Exploring awareness and contact	Exploring awareness and contact
Integrating creative and experimental approaches	Integrating creative and experimental approaches	Integrating creative and experimental approaches	Integrating creative and experimental approaches	Integrating creative and experimental approaches	Integrating creative and experimental approaches	Integrating creative and experimental approaches
Working with body process, resistance & impasse	Working with body process, resistance & impasse	Working with body process, resistance & impasse	Working with body process, resistance & impasse	Working with body process, resistance & impasse	Working with body process, resistance & impasse	Working with body process, resistance & impasse
Attending to ground	Attending to ground	Attending to ground	Attending to ground	Attending to ground	Attending to ground	Attending to ground and support

Figure 1.2. Holographic model of Gestalt counselling as a non-linear network or a complex adaptive system. The shaded boxes represent those tasks that are more in the foreground, while the unshaded boxes represent tasks that are in the background

Gestalt is not a linear process which leads directly from A to Z, moving sequentially through each of the intervening stages. It is more of a spiral process in which client and counsellor together explore life themes and undertake various aspects of the therapeutic process not once but several times, and where each successive exploration contributes to the support available for the next spiral of the overall process.

Figure I.2 offers a holographic model of Gestalt counselling and therapy as a field theoretical and relational approach (the original idea of a holographic model comes from Kepner, 1995). This model suggests that counselling and psychotherapy, growth and development are cyclical, multi-focal processes. Although counselling and psychotherapy do move through all the aspects indicated in Figure I.1 and described in this book, the movement is not a simple linear sequence but a complex interactive, spiralling and recursive process.

Any one of the aspects of therapeutic counselling which are illustrated in Figures I.2 and I.3 may become the focus for a while and will organise and shape the work while it is the focus. Subsequently that aspect or conceptual framework may recede into the background and be superseded by another aspect, task or framework which then organises the therapeutic work for the next phase. Even when one aspect or task is foreground, the other aspects are also present and can still inform the therapeutic counsellor's thinking and practice (although probably to a lesser degree).

For example when the counsellor first meets the client he or she may be concentrating on attending to the initial conditions and the need to develop rapport and clarify what the client wants. Thus *attention to beginnings* organises and shapes the counselling work at that time. But at the same time the counsellor may also be *observing the client's processes* of contacting the environment, *formulating some initial diagnostic hypotheses*; and *integrating some creative approaches*. Thus attention to observing process, formulating diagnostic hypotheses and integrating creative and bodily approaches are also present and shape and inform the counsellor's thinking and practice (although to a lesser degree). Figure I.3 illustrates how one or two main tasks or aspects of the therapeutic process organise the work for a time while others recede into the background, but remain present.

Each task or conceptual framework of counselling will be visited not once but many times in a spiralling and recursive fashion. Each spiral of work builds the foundation or support for the next spiral within the overall process. While it is fairly self-

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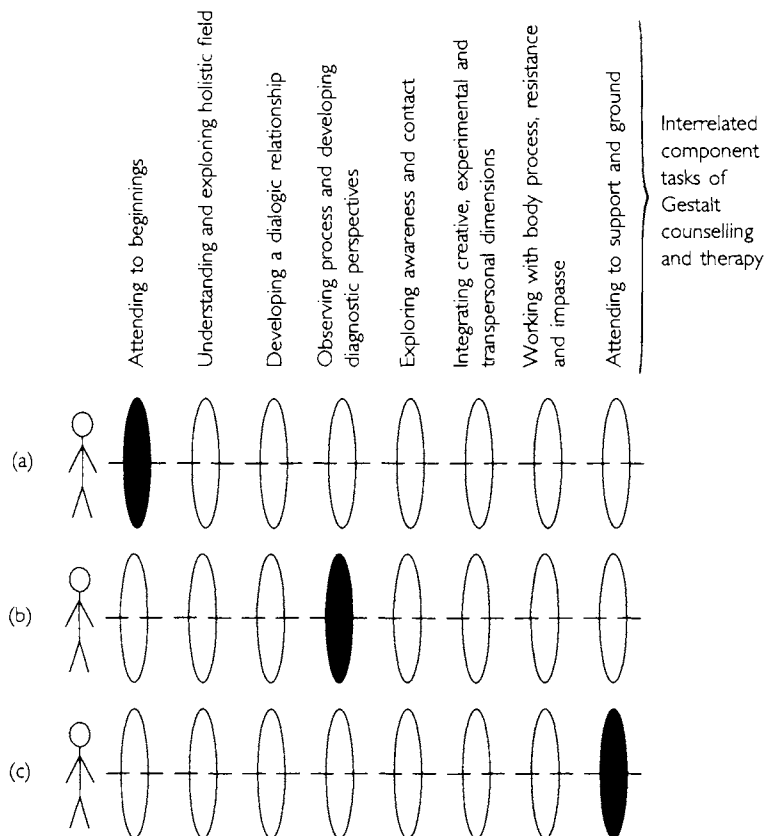


Figure 1.3 Cross-sections through the holographic model of Gestalt as a complex adaptive system. The shaded discs represent the task or aspect of the therapeutic process which is most in the foreground and organises the therapeutic work at that time. The unshaded discs represent tasks that are in the background but remain present and continue to influence the counsellor or therapist's thinking to a lesser degree

evident that attending sensitively to beginnings lays the foundation for the future development of trust and may well influence the quality and outcome of the therapeutic experience, it is perhaps less commonplace to suggest (as does this model) that attending to background features in clients' lives (such as exploring and developing their support network and/or the ways they assimilate the insights of counselling episodes) may provide a better and sometimes essential foundation for the development

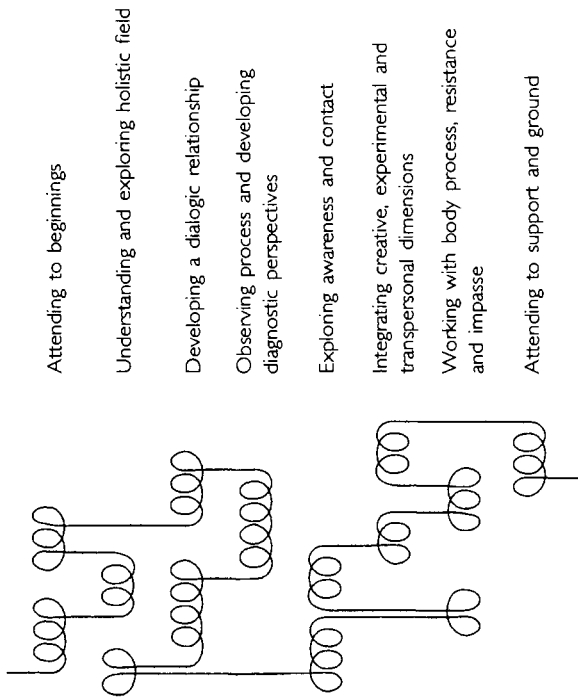


Figure I.4 Example of the complex spiralling and often recursive movement through the different interrelated tasks or aspects of Gestalt counselling or therapy

of awareness. Figure I.4 shows an example of how each aspect or conceptual framework of counselling may be visited not once but many times in this spiralling and recursive fashion.

Some discrete and sequential tasks and skills are, of course, associated with the beginning and ending of counselling and psychotherapy and these are described at the beginning and end of the book (see pp. 31, 209). However, even these tasks and skills will often be used in a spiralling and recurring, rather than a purely sequential manner, for beginning and ending skills are of course needed at the beginning and ending of each therapeutic session, before and after holiday breaks and so on.

This sort of holographic model for Gestalt counselling and therapy represents a non-linear network or complex adaptive system and is resonant with the latest developments in the new science of complexity (Stacey, 1995; Chia, 1994; Tsoukas, in press).

### **Multiple conceptual lenses or frameworks**

Such a model of Gestalt illustrates how a field approach to counselling and therapy is by its very nature multi-dimensional and requires the therapeutic counsellor to be able to survey and experience the field through many possible lenses or conceptual frameworks, sometimes sequentially, sometimes concurrently. A metaphorical way of envisaging this is to imagine that counsellors wear a pair of optician's testing glasses into which they can slot different lenses: sometimes the same lenses for both eyes, sometimes different lenses for each eye, sometimes several lenses at a time, in order to get a multi-dimensional picture of what is happening and what they need to do or how they need to be.

The counsellor slots in one or several lenses at a time and works through those lenses (or with those conceptual frameworks) for a time. Then the counsellor may add a new conceptual framework or substitute one conceptual framework for another and thus apprehend what is now required differently. For example he/she may be working through the frame of observing the client's styles of making and moderating contact and looking for ways to support the client's development of awareness. This work may reveal that the client is isolated or undersupported – so the counsellor may now slot in the lens of support systems and self functions and, experiencing the work through this frame, may stay with developing these functions before doing any further development of awareness. Alternatively the awareness work may reveal some deeply embedded life patterns and the therapeutic counsellor may slot in the lens of life themes and, looking through that framework, may begin to investigate how the client's life themes can be identified and unravelled, before attempting any further awareness work. Then again, the counsellor may discover that the client has little memory of previous work done, so he/she may slot in the lenses of reinforcement, reconsolidation and assimilation and see what needs to be done through that conceptual framework to help the client anchor awareness gained before carrying on with developing any new awareness.

### **Interweaving theory and practice**

Throughout the book I have tried to help the practitioner understand how theory applies to practice and how practice can be illuminated by theory. I have concentrated especially upon

discussing practice in terms of theory and upon illustrating theory by clinical examples. I have borne in mind the need of the practitioner and trainee to understand the practical implication of the theory, for it is this area of overlap which is consistently challenging and yet centrally important. Informal research using the Myers-Briggs type indicator<sup>R</sup> (MBTI<sup>R</sup>) suggests that most people who are attracted to the practice of Gestalt counselling and therapy are naturally intuitive, and Gestalt has always valued intuition very highly. But intuition alone is not enough – therapeutic counsellors also need the ability to conceptualise what they are doing and why, so as to ensure that they work safely with different clients at different stages and so that they can explain and be ethically accountable for their work:

This is a paradoxical and perplexing profession because the therapist must be able to deeply empathise with the client – must be able to enter the client's world and feel the world from the client's perspective – and yet the therapist is always professionally challenged to understand the client's experience in the format of theory . . . The paradox is that if the therapist is too theoretical, he can't apply this knowledge . . . On the other hand if the therapist is too applied, he will be deprived of the broad depth that theory can provide. (Hycner, 1988: 14)

Theoretical presentations are illustrated by client examples adapted from many different clinical settings and practitioners, including examples from the Gestalt literature. Many of the examples are accompanied by a theoretical commentary to further illustrate how the theory is demonstrated by the example. (All original examples are inspired by real people but for reasons of confidentiality and respect none are *based* upon real people, but upon a composite of the many different people I have worked with, supervised or read about.)

The book is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of Gestalt counselling and therapy but a discussion of selected aspects of contemporary integrative Gestalt. I have concentrated especially on those aspects of Gestalt theory and practice which have been least explored, where there has been most evolution in recent years, or on those aspects which have (in my experience as a trainer of Gestalt counsellors and therapists) been least well understood. Throughout I have endeavoured to show how field theory is not just a background idea (as it has often been presented in previous books) but a practical integrating frame which informs all our work. In particular I illustrate how the fact that we all organise (and can therefore reorganise) our perception of our circumstances or reconfigure our story or sense of self is crucial to counselling and to therapy; and to show how paying



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attention to all aspects of the intersubjective field and relationship is as much Gestalt therapy and counselling as the better known dramatic episodic demonstration work of Fritz Perls in the 1960s.

### **Gestalt as an art form**

One of the most important themes of Gestalt theory is that the whole is greater than and different from the sum of the component parts. So the whole that is Gestalt counselling and psychotherapy is of course also greater than and different from the sum of the component tasks shown in the holographic diagram (Figure 1.2) or described in this book.

Gestalt counselling and psychotherapy are elegant, and can be practised as an art form which requires knowledge of technique, practice and a sense of aesthetic style. All aspects of the therapeutic process, the therapist's openness, ability to relate, manner of talking, responding or moving, the timing of interventions, assessment and diagnostic skills, ability to link one session with another and to relate the moment by moment exploration with the client's background and problems, are part of the overall creative process. Each therapeutic session is like a canvas, a lump of raw clay or a blank piece of paper, through which the client and therapist will co-create a work of art for that day, which will be one creation within the interconnected series of works of art of the whole therapeutic experience between that client and that practitioner.

Each session and each therapeutic relationship has its own flow, shape and form. It is my job as a counsellor or psychotherapist to immerse myself in the craft, science, technique and tradition of my profession, to read, to study, watch and analyse the art of the masters of my craft in the same time-honoured way as artists in the visual or musical arts have always studied. Then standing on the shoulders of my predecessors and drawing on all the technique I have acquired, I try to create my own form and style through the discipline of continual practice, the education of feedback from others, trial and error, willingness to take risks, try things out, make a fool of myself, pick myself up and start all over again in a continual fresh creative learning cycle.

### *Versatility of Gestalt*

Field theoretical integrative Gestalt is an exceptionally versatile approach to counselling and psychotherapy, which can be

adapted to most people in many settings. It has, for example, been successfully used with depressed and alcoholic clients,<sup>1</sup> in psychiatric settings, for focused counselling in medical settings and GP surgeries, for people who have eating disorders, for survivors of sexual abuse, in organisational and educational settings and in consultancy. Its interrelational and systemic emphasis makes it particularly suitable for couples counselling and the exploration of family systems and for work with group, organisational and larger community or political systems

Gestalt can be exquisitely finely calibrated, so that the practice of Gestalt may include sitting in silence as a companion to someone who is dying, discussing study skills with a student, offering minuscule amounts of contact to a victim of abuse who trusts no one, playing the fool with someone who never got to play when they were a kid, designing a counselling at work scheme, or becoming involved in social, political or organisational action.

Occasionally people who are new to Gestalt will say that they 'can't do Gestalt with *their* clients' because their clients are 'too fragile', 'too nervous', 'too formal' or 'too fixed in their ways'. This sort of observation is based on a misconception which usually arises from mistaking some of the methods for the approach. Quite rightly they are feeling that they cannot do some of the things which they saw demonstrated in their training workshop with their clients in their work setting, but that does *not* mean that they cannot do Gestalt in that work setting. For Gestalt is not about practitioners getting clients to do things (experiments or any other techniques). It is always about practitioners finding out how and where clients are available for meeting and exploration and then imagining how they can best manifest themselves to meet the person at that point.

In one residential setting I worked with a client who had recently been hospitalised because she was seriously self harming and unable for the time being to lead an ordinary life in the community. She had frequently been physically and mentally abused and deeply shamed, as well as having been

1. With alcoholic clients, Carlock et al. (1992); with psychotics, Harris (1992); for focused counselling, Scott in Sills et al. (1995); with people suffering from eating disorders, Merian (1993); with survivors of sexual abuse, Kepner (1995); with organisations, Nevis (1987), Clark and Frazer (1987); with couples and family systems, Wheeler and Backman (1994); Zinker (1978, 1994), Kempler (1973), Papernow (1993); with group and larger community or political systems, Parlett and Hemming (1996).

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involved in illegal trading. She certainly wasn't open to any active experimentation and viciously dismissed the psychodrama group which she was offered as 'stupid' and 'childish'. Nor was she apparently available for contact or relationship with me or others as she maintained a stony silence most of the time, looking stormy but denying she had any feelings at all. It could have been ineffective and possibly even harmful at this stage to ask this young woman to experiment with seeing what it would be like to make better eye contact with me or breathe more deeply, or hold a 'two-chair dialogue between different aspects of herself' (interventions which many Gestaltists would think of as common 'Gestalt interventions' that attend to present process).

However, she was in residential care voluntarily and coming to see me more or less regularly; so I decided to believe that she came for something and to see my job as finding out what she did have energy for and how, if at all, I could reach out to her. I had to try and try again and be prepared to fail – which I frequently did – and yet I needed to be open to learn from her as I failed. Eventually I did find that she could make contact with me by letters in between the sessions and then by writing and drawing during sessions as well, that she could externalise her rage by filling the tiny sheets of the only art pad she would use with solid black and by cutting viciously through the pages of this same pad with the sharpened points of her pencils. Occasionally she could *visualise* herself doing what she wanted to do with me, such as speaking fluently to me, sometimes thumping my head against the wall, sometimes approaching me for the attention and affection she yearned for. Our discoveries of how I could be of service to her were infinitely slow and infinitely painful. Sometimes I had the impression of using a dropper feeder: one tiny drop of human contact or increased awareness at a time was all she could stand. Yet we did build some sort of a relationship and she did stop cutting herself.

This sort of delicate, painstaking, tentative work (or the very varying work with managers described on p. 114, for instance) is field theoretical and relational Gestalt because it emerged from the field conditions that the client and I co-created between us and because it met the client where she was available for meeting. Gestalt practitioners of all sorts need to attune themselves to clients and try to meet clients where clients are available for meeting. It is intrinsic to the Gestalt approach that practitioners adjust themselves, their approach and their methods to meet the client: 'It is the task of the therapist to build a "bridge" to where the client is. It is certainly not the responsibility of the client to build a bridge to where the therapist is' (Hycner, 1988: 108).

### Historical context

The reader may find that the model presented here differs substantially from some previous accounts of Gestalt which have

given less emphasis to field, self and relational theories as central and practical dimensions of self exploration and development. For contemporary Gestalt has deepened and matured its own theory and practice in response to changing circumstances in the world, to the changing needs of clients and to the changing climate in the field of counselling and psychotherapy (Yontef, 1991; Parlett and Hemming, 1996).

In the past Gestalt has too often been primarily associated with the style popularised by Fritz Perls in large demonstrations in the 1960s, so that many practitioners have mistakenly believed that Gestalt consists primarily of exercises, experiments and techniques. Brilliant though Fritz Perls's demonstration work often was, it was only one person's style of doing Gestalt and did not represent the theoretical and practical discipline as originally conceived by the founders of Gestalt in the 1940s and 1950s or as it has evolved in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

In the last ten to fifteen years, Gestaltists have taken important and far reaching steps to retain and develop the original creative complexity of Gestalt therapy; to fill the holes or lacks inherent in the Perlsian 1960s style by integrating new developments in counselling and psychotherapy, including some psychoanalytic and psychiatric perspectives. Overall, Gestalt has evolved a system of counselling and psychotherapy which meets the complex and varied needs of the 1990s.

For example, Gestaltists have developed the theory and practice of group therapy (Kepner, 1980; Zinker, 1980) and organisational consultancy (Nevis, 1987; Nevis et al., 1996). They have integrated recent research on child and adult development (Stern, 1985). They have articulated a theory of intersubjective relationships as the essential vehicle for healing and self development (Jacobs, 1989, 1992; Hycner, 1985, 1988, 1990; Yontef, 1993; Jacobs and Hycner, 1995). They have reconsidered field theory as a practical integrating framework that informs all our work, as well as the concepts of contact and moderating contact within the evolving field (Parlett, 1991; Wheeler, 1991). They have evolved systems of diagnosing habitual patterns of behaviour that are compatible with the Gestalt emphasis upon process and immediacy (Delisle, 1988, 1991, 1993b; Yontef, 1993; Melnick and Nevis, 1992). They have attended to the increasing number of clients with fragile self process who came for counselling in all settings, and have developed specialist Gestalt approaches for working with people who manifest varying styles of psychological fragility (such as narcissistic and borderline characteristics) (Tobin, 1982; Greenberg, 1989, 1991, 1995).

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Gestaltists have shown how Perlsian Gestalt of the 1960s tended to favour dramatic, episodic pieces of work without paying sufficient attention to the ground that supported those contact episodes or to the reintegration of individual contact episodes into the ground of the self (Wheeler, 1991); and have evolved various models of doing Gestalt therapeutic exploration over time, which ensure that contact episodes are seen within and integrated into the overarching structures and general context of the clients' life process (Shub, 1992; Kepner, 1995).

The relational and field theoretical model of Gestalt described in this book attempts to encompass some of these important recent developments in Gestalt theory and practice.

### **Theoretical background**

*If you are already familiar with Gestalt theory, or if you dislike reading theoretical background, you may wish to go straight to section 1 on p. 29.*

Gestalt therapy is rooted in a range of creative and theoretical disciplines as varied as modern physics, Eastern religion, existential phenomenology, theatre, psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, systems and field theory, bio-energetics and expressive movement. Elsewhere I have traced the origins, evolution and interweaving of these multiple influences upon Gestalt counselling and therapy in some detail (see Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993). Here I offer the briefest description of the evolution of holism, field theory, systems theory and those Gestalt principles of perception which underlie Gestalt therapy and counselling.

#### *Principles of perception within a field orientation*

The concept of systems and fields came from early twentieth-century physics which discovered and described the electromagnetic forces of the field surrounding objects, people and creatures. Field theory was adopted by other disciplines such as philosophy, social sciences and psychology. Of particular relevance to the development of Gestalt therapy were the adoptions of field theory by the holistic politician and philosopher Jan Smuts (1995), by the physician Goldstein (1939), by the Gestalt psychologists Koffka (1935), Wertheimer (1925 and 1938) and Kohler (1970), by the social scientist Kurt Lewin (1926, 1935, 1952)

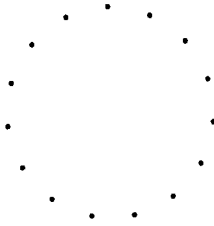


Figure 1.5 *Example of an incomplete form or gestalt which we automatically complete or make sense of*

(who developed field theory) and the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1950) who developed systems theory.

Jan Smuts (1995) developed the physicists' concept that everything has a field, proposing that things, ideas, animals, plants and persons like physical forces have their fields, and are unintelligible if considered without those fields. The Gestalt psychologists, in particular Wertheimer, explored and developed theories of perception within a field orientation, discovering principles of perception which were adopted and adapted both by Kurt Lewin in his subsequent exposition of field theory and by Fritz and Laura Perls in their innovative new approach to psychotherapy. Amongst these principles of perception the human urge to complete and the process of figure and ground are fundamental to Gestalt therapy and are now briefly described.

**The urge to complete** When we look at individual items and incomplete patterns we automatically and spontaneously complete them, supplying or guessing at the missing parts in order to complete or make meaning of the partial form. Thus when we look at Figure 1.5 we do not see fifteen disconnected or meaningless dots, we see a circle or a dotted circle. We see a completed 'figure' or gestalt. The German word *gestalt* means a whole or a complete pattern, form or configuration, which cannot be broken without destroying its nature. We make patterns and wholes of our experience: we have a spontaneous urge to complete or make meaning out of perceptual stimuli.

Psychologically also we organise our world (or field) in a similar fashion – we organise experience into meaningful wholes and we have a strong and inherent urge to complete or make meaning of our emotional life. We want to see completed emotional 'figures' or 'gestalten' against the background of the rest of the field. When we do so, we experience closure – we feel

emotional satisfaction, integration, insight and completion or alternatively we experience grieving, insight, letting go and subsequent closure. When we are unable to organise our experience to make sense or to achieve some sort of closure, we feel dis-ease or discomfort. People tend to remember unfinished situations better than finished ones (Zeigarnik, 1927) and they have a natural tendency to resume and complete unfinished tasks (Ovsiankina, 1928) and make meaning out of incomplete information and situations.

*Principle of figure and ground* The concept of figure and ground explains the process by which people organise their perceptions to form configurations which they endow with meaning. People don't apprehend the whole of themselves and their surroundings in one undifferentiated mass; they select and focus upon something they are interested in and this thing, person or process then appears as a bright figure against a dim background. People differentiate the field into those things which are relevant to the object of their interest and those which are not. As soon as their interest changes, they reconfigure the field, so that the first object of interest recedes into the background while something else becomes figural. This principle of perception has often been explicated and illustrated by the well-known picture of the vases/faces. This book concentrates on exploring the psychological differentiation or organisation of the field according to people's past experience and expectations (see pp. 54 and 93).

Kurt Lewin took the Gestalt psychology model beyond the world of laboratory testing, developing the Gestalt psychologists' concept of the field and principles of visual perceptions and applying them to the more complex realm of everyday life. In particular, Lewin emphasised the fact that individuals actively organise or constellate their field and make meaning of their experience, according to their current needs and to the prevailing conditions in which they find themselves, and he underlined that events and people can thus only be understood as a whole and in context.

The founders of Gestalt therapy – Fritz and Laura Perls and Paul Goodman – extended the Gestalt principles of perception and Lewin's field theory. Gathering holistic field notions from a wide range of sources, they applied them to the field of psychological health and disturbance, developing a practical form of psychotherapy based on their extension of these principles. For example they developed the psychological concepts of self-other regulation, contact, interruptions to contact, unfinished business

and fixed gestalt to explain psychological health and disturbance and created a therapy which offered uniquely imaginative and creative ways to complete or resolve people's unfinished business and free them up to move on with their life. I will briefly describe these concepts, as a knowledge of them is an essential background to this book.

### *Self-other regulation and the emotional organisation of the field*

People have physical and emotional needs and a natural urge to regulate themselves and meet those needs. They organise their experience, sensation, images, energy, interest and activity around their needs until they have met or otherwise resolved them. Once a need is met or resolved, it recedes into the background, allowing people to be at rest until a new need or interest emerges and the cycle starts over again. The process of self-other regulation does not ensure that people can always satisfy their needs. Often the environment simply does not currently offer the needed element or quality. Closure can also be achieved by acknowledging the unfulfilled need and experiencing and expressing the emotions evoked by the impossibility of meeting the need. Such emotions might include frustration, grief, disappointment.

Perls used to claim that if the individual had a conflict of needs then the dominant need would take precedence, citing the example of the dehydrated corporal in the desert whose need for water completely obliterated his interest in promotion. However, recent Gestalt therapists have extended and greatly enhanced the concept of self-other regulation by describing the complexity of our human needs and desires: in a complex field people often don't have one dominant desire but experience genuinely competing values and desires and they are thus sometimes unable to resolve their desires but may seek acceptable and sometimes painful compromises in complex field conditions. Melnick et al. (1995) give the example of Ilsa and Rick in the movie *Casablanca*. Ilsa, who is married to another man has finally agreed to run off with Rick. Just as they are about to achieve their longed for escape together, Rick does a dramatic turnaround, telling a stunned Ilsa that she must go with her husband, explaining that if they go off together she would regret it, 'maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life'. Melnick et al. add a new twist to the plot by reminding their audience that things aren't that simple because Rick could equally have said 'if