

NEW DIRECTIONS IN GESTALT GROUP THERAPY

Relational Ground, Authentic Self



PETER H. COLE AND DAISY REESE
With an introduction by Erv Polster

Praise for *New Directions in Gestalt Group Therapy: Relational Ground, Authentic Self*

“With *New Directions in Gestalt Group Therapy*, Peter Cole and Daisy Reese have made an important contribution to gestalt therapy’s growing library of clinical and theoretical literature. Cole and Reese’s integration of gestalt and group therapy principles opens up new avenues of thinking and introduces methodological advances that will be highly relevant to all gestalt therapists who work with groups—whether they work as practitioners, trainers, or organizational consultants. Deeply personal in parts, and interlaced throughout with rich clinical material, this book is the product of mature clinicians who approach theory with sophistication and creativity. I recommend it to all gestalt therapists who work with groups.”

Gary Yontef, PhD, author of *Awareness, Dialogue and Process: Essays on Gestalt Therapy* (Gestalt Journal Press, 1988)
and co-founder and senior faculty member of the
Pacific Gestalt Institute

“This is a well-written, wonderful weaving together of solid gestalt therapy theory and modern group therapy principles, including the all-important systems theory. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. The clinical material was interesting and helpful in elucidating the theory. After running groups and teaching group therapy for almost five decades, I found much to think about for my own practice and teaching. The authenticity, humanness, and mastery of Daisy and Peter shine throughout. I especially appreciated the various quotes—and the Afterword commenting on the election of Donald Trump. I feel strongly that those of us with an understanding of group dynamics have much to say to our fellow citizens at this time in our country’s history.”

Maryetta Andrews-Sachs, LICSW, CGP, FAGPA, faculty
(former dean and chair), Washington (DC) School of Psychiatry
National Group Psychotherapy Institute, and past president,
Mid-Atlantic Group Psychotherapy Society

“I love this whole book! It will be so useful to the world of group facilitators and the world of gestalt practice. Peter and Daisy speak with a lovely balance between theory, pragmatics, and examples: breaking new ground, they elaborate the shadow side of group dynamics in a way that expands our maps and our capacities to meet each other more fully and humanly while also calling our attention to the importance of the “experienced cultural influences” and capacities for gestalt group therapy to impact social change. A great new contribution.”

Mary Ann Kraus, PsyD, co-chair of the Groups Facilitation
Training Program, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland

“This new book of Peter Cole and Daisy Reese is another step in moving beyond the hot seat to group processes, integrating gestalt ideas of awareness, contact, and presence that focus on the individual with field theory forces that relate to the group-as-a-whole. In today’s digital world with its virtual connections, the idea of contact and the importance of embodiment, so central in gestalt theories and gestalt group therapy, seem obsolete. Peter and Daisy remind us that without contact we lose our meaningful attachment to one another. The relational emphasis of the writers puts this book at the cutting edge in the field of psychotherapy. I recommend this book both to therapists who do not know enough about gestalt group therapy and to gestalt colleagues who want to deepen their understanding in this field.”

Haim Weinberg, PhD, co-author of *The Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups, and Societies* (Karnac Books, 2010), and past president of the Israeli Association of Group Psychotherapy and the Northern California Group Psychotherapy Society

“*New Directions in Gestalt Group Therapy* does a fine job both of elaborating the theory of gestalt group therapy and of inviting the reader to the experience of *what it is* to participate in such groups. At the same time, this book goes beyond the sometimes-limiting boundaries of gestalt therapy, introducing the reader to the wider view and values that the gestalt philosophy of being entails. The authors remind us that there is a part of each person that sometimes is in need of help. They invite the reader to find hope both personally and collectively through connectedness and relationship. This book reminds us that all humans survive and thrive in groups, and the quality of our lives depends on our ability to co-exist as peacefully and respectfully as possible.”

Dr Talia Bar-Yoseph Levine, president elect of the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy and editor of *The Bridge: Dialogues across Cultures* (Gestalt Institute Press, 2005) and *Gestalt Therapy: Advances in Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2011)

“This clearly written book is an invaluable resource for clinicians of any theoretical orientation. It is packed with a wealth of essential information for beginning professionals as well as for seasoned therapists, and a must-read for students and those in training. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in deepening their knowledge and understanding of group work, and how groups work!”

Eva Gold, PsyD, co-director of the Gestalt Therapy Training Center-Northwest and author of *Buddhist Psychology* and *Gestalt Therapy Integrated: Psychotherapy for the 21st Century* (in press)

New Directions in Gestalt Group Therapy

Gestalt therapists often work with groups. Group therapists from a variety of theoretical orientations frequently incorporate insights and methodology from gestalt therapy. *New Directions in Gestalt Group Therapy: Relational Ground, Authentic Self* was written paying particular attention to both gestalt and group work specialists to provide a comprehensive reference for the practice of group therapy from a gestalt perspective. It includes an introduction to gestalt therapy terms and concepts written to make the gestalt approach understandable and accessible for mental health practitioners of all backgrounds. It is appropriate for students as well as seasoned psychotherapists.

Peter Cole and Daisy Reese are the co-directors of the Sierra Institute for Contemporary Gestalt Therapy located in Berkeley, California. They are the co-authors of *Mastering the Financial Dimension of Your Psychotherapy Practice* and *True Self, True Wealth: A Pathway to Prosperity*. They are a married couple, with five children and four grandchildren between them.

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New Directions in Gestalt Group Therapy

Relational Ground, Authentic Self

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We dedicate this book to our family. Our children and their partners, Ananda and Joe, Reese and Faith, Alex and Katy, Elizabeth and Danny, and Hannah and James, are beautiful people with whom we love experiencing all of life's joys, challenges, and seasons. Our grandchildren, Sammy, Rowan-Hays, Eleanor, and Jack, light up our lives. Peter's mom, Joan Cole, at 87 years old, is passionate about her continuing work as a gestalt therapist, has provided insightful feedback on early drafts of this book, and has been a consistent source of emotional support. Thank you all for being the most loving family we could possibly ask for.



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Foreword

This book is embedded in what Peter Cole and Daisy Reese have called the “grand journey in a caravan peopled with seekers of truth, authenticity, and connection.” While carefully and extensively spelling out a range of the gestalt therapy principles, they humanize these principles by telling a story of the lives their therapy groups exemplify. Such attention given to ordinary human feelings and purposes takes the reader beyond the boundaries of psychopathology that often dominate the therapeutic literature. By vitalizing the breadth of personal existence, the authors create a fertile atmosphere of mutuality and discovery. They weave the life experiences of their group members in and out of theoretical guidelines. For the professional therapist, this lights up a recognizable pathway to help people recover displaced aspects of personal relationship. These principles provide a scaffold for reconstructing diminished personal effectiveness, stimulating people to revisit stories of miscast bargains they live with. The abundance of storyline gives immediacy to the struggle of people who have sacrificed vitality and relationship so as to soften the pain of contradiction and abandoned purpose.

In this journey, the authors guide the reader to many of those specifics of gestalt therapy that introduce group members to a life of possibility. In a group atmosphere of connectedness and belonging, they light up the lessons that reveal previously blurred beauty, hidden by a lifetime of habits and familiarity. Yes, connectedness and belonging are keys to the group arousal, enveloping them into a safe experiment with good living. The convergence of group members’ attention creates a sense of enhanced personal identity and a commonly felt enchantment.

There are far-reaching implications of the authors’ relational emphasis. The highlighting of connectedness and belonging, fundamental to living, honors the power of group members to provide a non-professional therapeutic effect. This communal contribution each person may offer the others is a serendipitous augmentation. It not only enlarges the work of

therapeutic authority but also promises to widen the relevance of group therapy. In a society seeking maximal function of each person, the task of the therapist is a highly developed discipline multiplying a fundamental skill available to everyone. We are all on the edge of being experts in living. The increase in each person's search for a secure vitality is a step beyond the medical purpose of dissolving personal disturbance. That is, the conversations among group members and the insights they achieve are amply reported in this book and reveal the recovery of wisdom. These expansions of personal perspective join the original curative purposes. They offer a surprising relief of disturbance by inspiring people to look freshly at themselves and others. To live well is the ultimate wish that is always implicit in the role of group therapy, which seeks to expand anyone's life vista. By accepting the basics of personhood shared by everyone, the feeling that we are all in this together is not only comforting but also responsive to a basic human reflex. In gestalt therapy theory, the basic principle is that all experience is made up of figure and ground. Nothing is experienced all by itself. People experience nothing as an entity alone. Indeed, everything is inevitably embedded in an enveloping context. This principle, accordingly, points us to the fact that people innately wish to connect with each other and to identify with a group to which they belong.

Such a move—to honor both self and other—requires considerable savvy. The skill and opportunity required are all tapped in the therapy group environment. This transcendence beyond ordinary curative purpose into the more poetic, lyrical aspects of living is well reflected by Cole and Reese (p. 165):

The journey to aliveness, engagement in the world, risk-taking and connectedness is the grandest journey of all. And like all archetypal journeys, it can be terrifying at times. It involves contending with each other in group, grappling with our demons, being lost, getting found, experiencing rupture and repair. We need each other to do this work, which is hallowed by the group that confronts us, challenges us, cries with us, laughs with us, calls us to account, and most importantly, belongs to us: passionately counting us as one of its members, and refusing to give up on us, even when we have shown the parts of ourselves of which we are the most ashamed.

Yes, indeed, this book takes its place in the expansion of cultural orientation and guidance, honoring the human spirit. This is represented in the ordinary concerns of everyday people. They are the people, amply illustrated in this book, honored by simple recognition of the inspirational qualities of people connecting with people. In the face of hidden dangers

that linger everywhere, they help to navigate through this abundance of human experience. We see in this journey the beauty that is haunted by the indivisible dangers residing in the human vista. One is grateful for Cole and Reese, who serve as wise guides keeping a vigilant eye out for the intrusions that interfere with simple blessedness.

Erving Polster 2017



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We would like to thank our editorial assistant, Sarah Jenkins, for her help in getting the manuscript for this book in shape for submission to Routledge. From the moment we connected with you, Sarah, your dedication to this project has been total. Thank you!

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Four Notes to Our Readers

On Gender and Pronoun Usage in this Book

In an effort to include people of all genders, we have adopted the occasional use of the singular “they” as a non-binary pronoun. While this wording might sound awkward at first to some readers, we feel that it is appropriate for a book on gestalt group therapy, a form of psychotherapy that deeply values diversity.

On Authorship

Peter Cole and Daisy Reese have co-written all the chapters of this book. However, some chapters were written in either Daisy or Peter’s first-person voice. At the beginning of each chapter, we will make note of whether it is written in Daisy’s voice, Peter’s voice, or both.

On Clinical Vignettes and Client Anonymity

Throughout this book we present a variety of clinical vignettes. All clinical vignettes are thoroughly fictionalized, bringing forth clinical themes while protecting client confidentiality by creating purely fictional characters and situations.

On “Gestalt Group Therapy” and Its Acronym “GGT”

Throughout this book we will use the term “gestalt group therapy” and its acronym “GGT” interchangeably.



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Introduction

Gestalt Group Therapy: A Robust Approach for the Challenges of 21st Century Psychotherapy

This introduction is written in the voices of both Peter and Daisy

Gestalt group therapy (GGT) provides a robust, theoretically rich, and methodologically sound framework for 21st century group therapy. As we will see in the ensuing chapters, GGT's holistic, field-centered approach allows the therapist to hold the therapy group with breadth and depth. GGT has the breadth to address social and political concerns that arise in the therapy group, along with the depth to support the emotional growth and development of group members while concurrently offering an experience of human connection and community.

Gestalt therapy is a humanistic system of psychology that grew historically out of the rich tapestry of European intellectual life in pre-World War II Germany, with its roots in progressive psychoanalysis, gestalt psychology,¹ field theory, phenomenology, and Martin Buber's ([1923] 1970, 1992) philosophy of dialogue (Bocian, 2010). The political and social devastation caused by fascism and the resulting diaspora of European intellectual life was the chaos from which gestalt therapy emerged in the early 1950s in New York City. GGT has the rich history, theory, and creative methodology that today's group therapists need to assist their clients with the many challenges they face.

Our intention with this book is twofold. First, we seek to describe, explain, and communicate the approach to gestalt group therapy that we have been practicing and honing for over 25 years. This involves the application of gestalt therapy theory and methodology to the interactive, process-oriented group situation. In so doing, we have developed some new ideas and ways of looking at both gestalt therapy and group therapy. Second, we seek to present the elegance of gestalt therapy theory to group therapists who may not be familiar with the gestalt approach. This task is an exciting and daunting one for us. We hope that gestalt therapists will gain a greater understanding of how to work with the group interactively, and that group therapists who practice from other

theoretical orientations will be enriched by their exposure to gestalt therapy's sophisticated yet practical theory.

Psychotherapy in This Uncertain Age

"May you live in interesting times." All of us, therapists and clients alike, are certainly living under that ancient Chinese curse. Ecologically, in particular, we are living in an age of unprecedented uncertainty. Our planet, the very ground of our existence, is undergoing profound change, with humanity's future looking anything but certain. Despite living in these "interesting times," however, our clients face all the challenges of shaping lives of love and meaningful work that people have grappled with throughout the ages. Our task as therapists is to help our clients live, fully invested in their lives, while simultaneously supporting them in facing the reality that our collective future is endangered; supporting our clients in fashioning full and forward-looking lives while simultaneously supporting their awareness of the precarious present, presents a paradoxical challenge for psychotherapy in the 21st century.

From both an ecological and a social perspective, we live in a time of growing uncertainty that poses new ethical and clinical challenges for psychotherapy. The gap between rich and poor has become excessive and extreme. Autocratic and nationalistic leaders are ascending in the US and Europe. Weapons of mass destruction proliferate, religiously fueled extremism is on the rise, and as the ecological crisis threatens the world's resources, the conditions that give rise to instability and warped ethnic, religious, and nationalistic ideologies are fueled. Creating a caring, nurturing atmosphere for our clients and working with them in the context of these unsettling environmental, political, and social conditions is a great challenge for modern psychotherapy.

In the spiritual dimension, our clients seek meaning, connection to others, and connection to the greater whole. In our consultation rooms, we psychotherapists do our part to support our clients in their search for connection and meaning in this time of critical social and ecological change. In an age when traditional religions are in decline, the ritual of coming to the psychotherapy group can become quite meaningful in a client's life, offering an environment where vulnerabilities can be shared safely, truths can be spoken, and meaning searched for.

Meanwhile, remarkable changes in our scientifically informed understanding of the nature of reality have shifted our worldview from one of separateness to one of relationality. New understandings in physics inform us that even seemingly inert matter, at the most fundamental level, can be understood as energy in relationship (Capra & Luisi, 2014). Similarly, advances in neuroscience offer new models of the mind that