Editorial

Clarion Call: Research and Gestalt Therapy

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The strongly expressed demand or request for action carried in the title of this editorial is owed here on two counts: first, to Mark McConville’s invocation of the phrase in “Commentary I: Gestalt Therapy, Research, and Phenomenology” (p. 30) to affirm Philip Brownell’s call to “get serious about research” in Gestalt therapy; and second, to Thomas Gross’s use of the term in his review of Carolyn Lukensmeyer’s book, Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table: A Guide for Public Managers (p. 65). My own energy around “clarion,” I must confess, springs from a third place: another hat as an academic in the field of early modern (17th-century) Spanish theatre. Clarín [Clarion], an unforgettable gracioso or “fool-figure” in Calderón de la Barca’s La vida es sueño [Life’s A Dream], is a trumpeting seeker of the temporary advantage, the instant reward, forced to acknowledge the error of his life by the reality of his fortuitous death.
This inverted deflection on my part is meant to underscore—by playing, of course, on the proverbial principle of polarity—the continual advantage and recurrent reward afforded by research if for no other reason than, as McConville concurs, “we [Gestaltists] find ourselves frequently dismissed or overlooked because we have failed to represent our strengths adequately in the court of scientific research” (p. 30). Todd Burley, in “Commentary II: Can We Get Back to Being Serious about the Processes of Experience, Awareness, and the Action of Gestalt Formation Resolution?” coincides with this viewpoint: “Whether we like it or not, it is incumbent upon us as Gestalt therapists to be able to meet the demands of the modern psychotherapeutic world for evidence, and to show that what we do is effective and ‘works’” (p. 33). And Leanne O’Shea, in “Commentary III: Cultivating a Community of Practitioner/Researchers,” is in agreement, though with the following caveat: “But, for me, taking the questions of research seriously means developing within the Gestalt community processes of inquiry that give careful consideration to the effectiveness of our work, while also deconstructing our motivations for pursuing a research agenda” (p. 37).

With such concord comes—necessarily and healthily—some discord: a lack of unanimity with respect to the form research might take, the content it might support, and how the process might evolve (deflect again, if you will, to the Lord-High Executioner’s ironical assertion, in Gilbert and Sullivan’s Mikado, about the possibility of agreement by all people involved only in an authoritarian environment where one individual wears all of the official hats, as he himself does: “Never knew such unanimity on a point of law in my life!”). Brownell’s so denominated clarion call is informed by a contemporary philosophy of science that is a product of naturalism, critical realism, and postpositivism, so as to “undergird the selection of methods for ascertaining and developing evidence to support an evidence-based practice,” as one might see fit to construct it (p. 6).

McConville’s take on research, however, as the title of his commentary indicates, is that of a phenomenological psychologist generally (trained as he was by Amedeo Giorgi); for one thing, he believes that “the danger with adopting a scientific paradigm whose definitive bias is measurement is that phenomena under study are likely to be framed in a fashion conducive to their measurement” (p. 25). In response to Brownell’s assertion that “McConville holds in disdain the evidence-based movement” and “sees it hopelessly linked to naturalism and science” (p. 20), McConville, after clarifying the decontextualization of the initial assertion, summarizes his stance as follows: “My primary difference with Brownell lies in our respective attitudes and faith in the assumptions and methodologies of natural science. My disdain is not for research. My disdain is for research that denudes the phenomena we
wish to understand” (p. 26).

Burley enters the discussion by calling for a clear definition of experience and awareness, and then asserts that Brownell is “perfectly correct when he proposes research that would aggregate similar experiences in a group of patients;” the importance of “becoming aware of a pattern” is crucial (p. 34). “That awareness,” he says, “the foundation of the research necessary to improve practice”; and he goes on: “Research is always the phenomenological process because it looks for difference at the boundary; it is the constant outcome of figure-ground process activity” (p. 34, emphasis in original).

O’Shea speaks passionately “for cultivating a supervisory culture that allows supervisees to engage in a reflexive practice” and be “more thoughtful and proactive about gathering feedback from clients” (p. 41). For her, it is important to be clear about the “values and epistemological assumptions” that underpin any research project so as not to “collude with dominant practices”; and to guard carefully core values of Gestalt—such as “privileging of experience over theorizing,” and “understanding the complex field conditioners that go into any situation”—when undertaking a research design (p. 44). In his Response to the Commentaries, however, Brownell begs to differ: “We do not get to choose what our investigations will lead us to—not ahead of time, not on an a priori basis. Nothing is for sure except that the process will find us out” (p. 53).

If, in this thought-provoking dialogic exchange, the four authors have agreed in principle about the importance of developing a Gestalt therapy research tradition, each has addressed related issues as well; the brief overview here represents only the tip of the iceberg. Vincent Beja, in “A Pragmatic Perspective on the Gestalt Therapy Experience,” adds his voice from the standpoint of the therapist. His pragmatic approach depends first on the setting of a clear goal with a client; then on a definition of how to put that goal into action; and finally on a call for “a real work of research” to describe with precision what he as therapist actually does with his client, and not just what he thinks he does, because “we can consciously grasp the therapeutic work in its concrete reality only with an observation that is retrospective (or from outside the situation)” (p. 55).

This number of Gestalt Review is particularly rich in reviews and reflections which remind us, each in its own way, of how present and expansive our field is—however much it is (or is not) qualified or quantified by a research methodology. Gross’s review of Lukensmeyer’s book is “a clarion call to governmental managers and citizens alike to revitalize our American democracy” (p. 65), offering within the field of “deliberative democracy” a comprehensive and innovative methodology steeped in Gestalt theory and
practice, and sharpened by a set of compelling case histories. We then move *from* Gestalt practice in action to theory in relational Gestalt therapy with Sylvia Crocker’s profusely detailed and rigorously analytic reading of Jean-Marie Robine’s book, *On the Occasion of the Other*, which deals with two distinct but related issues: “in one of these, Robine is concerned to develop a consistent field-relational view of the therapeutic situation”; and “the other involves his effort to develop a thoroughly dynamic view of the self” (p. 70).

Kevin Carley, in a creative reflection entitled “Flying Fish, Elephants, and Gestalt Theory”—the outgrowth of Gestalt International Study Center’s coaching certification program—explores the connections between his interest in evolutionary biology and the Gestalt concepts of paying close attention to sensation and awareness. These reflections, he believes, will prove useful to his clients and himself as he goes forward with his coaching career. And in his reading of the motion picture *Lincoln*, Bud Feder reflects on “the change over the years in the Gestalt therapy approach to promoting change in our clients”—from “a degree of harshness to more gentleness” he thinks A. Lincoln would have approved of (p. 89)—certain historical inaccuracies of the film notwithstanding.

This issue closes sadly with two obituaries: one written by Stephanie (Penny) Backman on the passing of Christine L. Mullen; and the other penned by Gordon Wheeler on the loss of Taylor Stoehr. I was privileged to have met both of these people, Christine at a Gestalt International Study Center workshop; and Taylor, first when he graced *Gestalt Review* 13.1 with a guest editorial in 2009, and then when we went to dinner and a play in Boston that same year. The *in memoriam* tributes speak for themselves, but let me offer an exhortation of my own: *Requiescant in pace, Que descansen en paz*, Christine and Taylor—if you can take the time!

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