Editorial

The Gestalt Research Tradition: Figure and Ground

SUSAN L. FISCHER, PH.D.

“Research is complete only when the results are shared with the [scientific] community.” Thus begins the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2007, p. 3). Journal articles, the manual goes on to specify, “are usually reports of empirical studies, review articles, theoretical articles, methodological articles, and case studies” (p. 7).

This issue of *Gestalt Review* foregrounds precisely these types of articles. The first cluster “traces the development of theory to expand and refine theoretical constructs” (APA, 2007, p. 8, emphasis added). Todd Burley’s polemical paper, “A Phenomenologically Based Theory of Personality,” is accompanied by Lynne Jacobs and Mark McConville’s mostly dissenting Commentaries – “Whither Meaningfulness?” and “Phenomenology, Or Not? Reflections on Burley’s Proposed Theory of Personality”– respectively. Burley then rises to the dialogic challenge posed by his colleagues in the concluding...

Sidse M. H. Arnfeld’s review article, “Gestalt Therapy for Patients with Schizophrenia: A Brief Review,” offers a “meta-analysis” and “critical evaluation” of material already published, identifying “relations, contradictions, gaps and inconsistencies in the literature,” and suggesting an alternative (Gestalt) treatment (APA, 2007, p. 7).

The empirical study – “A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Assessment, Diagnosis, and Recommended (Gestalt) Treatment” – authored by Dilani M. Perera-Diltz, John M. Laux, and Sarah M. Toman provides a report of original research in distinct, sequenced sections that reflect the stages in the research process, i.e., introduction, method, results, discussion (APA, 2007, p. 7). Two detailed statistical tables are provided at the end.

The final article, penned by Trevor Bentley on “Shame in Organisations,” represents the case study type of research: it “describes case material obtained while working with an individual or organization to illustrate a problem, to indicate a means for solving a problem, or to shed light on needed research or theoretical matters” (APA, 2007, pp. 8-9). Maria Papacostaki’s review of Bud Feder’s book, Gestalt Group Therapy: A Practical Guide, would appear to dovetail with this case study type of article.

Whither the foregoing figure of research in the form of theoretical article, review article, empirical study, and case study? The editor invites Philip Brownell (philbrownell@logic.bm) to provide some ground for the Gestalt research tradition.

*PB: In April of 2013, the Gestalt world will convene an international conference devoted to research. It will feature established researchers and mentors from diverse countries, showcase completed and ongoing research on Gestalt therapy, and explore the philosophy of science behind the choices of various methods, including what those methods can best be used to accomplish.

What is the ground for this conference? What has lead up to it? Over the last decade, Gestalt therapists have become increasingly interested in research. In the face of growing concern in the wider field of psychotherapy for evidence to support practice, Gestalt therapists began to realize that the burden for producing evidence supporting Gestalt therapy would fall upon themselves rather than upon the usual mix of experimental psychologists and researchers in established academic institutions. The dominant paradigm of cognitive
behavioral therapy preoccupied most such research, and there still remained relatively little awareness of contemporary Gestalt therapy. With the looming linkage between research evidence and public policy, and the growing movement toward treatment guidelines, Gestalt therapy was in danger of becoming quite marginalized. We live in an age in which public policy is marching on; it is influenced by psychology-as-science. Already the situation in Germany, in which Gestalt therapy had indeed been disenfranchised, had become a sobering reality. Uwe Strümpfel's (2006) summary of Gestalt therapy research left a clear message. Gestalt therapists would have to do much more to prevent similar things from happening elsewhere.

In 2008, a large group of established Gestalt therapists published a volume dedicated to the issue of research on Gestalt therapy. That book, *The Handbook for Theory, Research, and Practice in Gestalt Therapy*, has now been translated and published in French, Spanish, Czech, and is in the process of being translated into Portuguese and Korean. The interest in Gestalt research has become quite global.

The forthcoming research conference formed as an outgrowth of such interest on the part of the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT), which also created a research task force and adopted resolutions supporting the establishment of actual research. Co-organized by Philip Brownell and Joseph Melnick, it will be cohosted by AAGT and the Gestalt International Study Center (GISC), and take place at the Sonia March Nevis and Edwin C. Nevis MeetingHouse on Cape Cod.

It is also hoped that the research conference will become an opportunity for a growing dialogue with established researchers outside of the discipline of Gestalt therapy. Already number of established researchers in the fields of psychotherapy process and outcome, psychotherapy integration, psychodynamic, and relationship research have been contacted. If this conference proves successful, the opportunity to broaden our dialogue with research teams at established universities is a real one.

The approach to research exemplified in this conference is a wide-lens perspective. It is inclusive rather than exclusive. As the thematic title indicates, it is aimed at *The Challenge of Establishing a Research Tradition for Gestalt Therapy*. Doing research that properly fits the Gestalt approach in psychotherapy is part of this challenge. Doing the “right kind” of research that “fits” Gestalt therapy goes back to the difference among philosophers of science between naturalists and antinaturalists. Phenomenology is an antinaturalist system in terms of the philosophy of science (McPherson, 1992; Anchin, 2008). Those at home with naturalism embrace the scientific method, and those at home with antinaturalism embrace the phenomenological method. From that comes the split between doing quantitative or qualitative
research. The cause of Gestalt therapy, however, needs both, not only because mixed methods designs have more potency, but also because these two approaches are essentially different tools that accomplish different things and should be used accordingly. It just will not suffice, for instance, to try to establish the efficacy of Gestalt therapy with a strictly qualitative approach. Researchers get a great amount of texture and color with that, which helps to establish hypotheses about what works and what does not, but disproving the null hypothesis sometimes becomes necessary, and for that one needs a more quantitative approach. That last assertion is not accepted by all (perhaps by few), but therein resides the kind of difference that will generate healthy and vital discussion.

*Thank you, Philip Brownell. Gestalt Review invites all presenters at the The Challenge of Establishing a Research Tradition for Gestalt Therapy conference to submit their papers to be considered for publication in the journal. Selected proceedings will be published in a special issue (assuming, of course, that they have passed successfully through the masked, peer-refereed editorial process).

In the here and now we invite you, our readers, to consult the GISC website (gisc.org/practitioners/programs/ResearchConference.php) to get more information about the state-of-the-art event, which will take place 17-20 April, 2013. Above all, we urge you to attend, participate, and share your thoughts and research in oral or written form. It has all the markings of a challenging, enriching, and nourishing experience, especially for those with clinical, organizational, educational, and/or theoretical interests.

Susan L. Fischer, Ph.D.
sfischer@bucknell.edu

REFERENCES


