Editorial
The Gestalt Culture-Inclusive, Revolutionary and Optimistic

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GESTALT THERAPY'S ORIGINAL VALUES are still very much alive today, both in practice and in theory. These values, which closely reflect those of its founders, distinguish Gestalt therapy from other approaches. They are embedded in our inclusive philosophy, revolutionary perspective, and optimistic view of change. Let me explain.

Inclusive Philosophy

Our value of inclusion is related to our theoretical beginnings. Gestalt therapy was created and developed primarily by three individuals, Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, and Paul Goodman. Having three creators stands in sharp contrast to most psychotherapies that have only one primary founder and which are known more by the names of their creators (Adlerian, Jungian, Sullivanian, Rogerian, etc.) than by their more "formal" names (Individual, Analytic, Interpersonal, Client-Centered, etc.).

The unofficial naming of a psychotherapy after its founder is not just a matter of semantics, but reflects a common process of theoretical deification that often befalls therapeutic approaches. As a therapy becomes popular, potential input and new ideas are often discouraged. A sad historical fact is that colleagues and followers of the creator are often admonished, banished or shunned if they attempt to expand, embellish,

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Dr. Melnick, editor of Gestalt Review, has been practicing, teaching, and writing about Gestalt therapy for over 25 years.

1 This is not to neglect the contribution of many others, including Paul Weisz, Elliot Shapiro, and Isadore From.
or reformulate the founder’s theory. As a result, therapies often become a permanent representation of their founders, and thereby locked in time.

Fortunately, this has not been true for Gestalt therapy. It is not, however, just the collaborative genesis that has spawned our flexibility and unique set of values. Gestalt therapy, in terms of its theory, practice, and evolution, reflects not only the values of the founders as individuals, but also how these values were lived out in their relationships with each other.

As individuals, Goodman and Laura and Fritz Perls were each multifaceted, complex, and ever changing. They were not shy about altering their views and opinions as they grew and evolved. They did, however, share one common belief about Gestalt therapy: They all viewed it as a theory constantly in flux. Of course, this is also their opinion of the “self” and the “individual,” and is reflected in Gestalt therapy theory.

Although rumors abound concerning what they meant to each other, what is clear is that their relationships honored differences. They went separate ways, lived out their dissimilarities, yet remained true to the values of Gestalt therapy.

This legacy of inclusion continues to be reflected in contemporary Gestalt therapy. Although we speak of different forms embodying different aspects of our theory, (words such as Perlsian and Lewinian are bandied about), or different “schools,” (in the USA, “East Coast,” “West Coast,” and “Cleveland” are often referenced), in reality, these differences are relatively small and inconsequential when values are considered, rather than therapeutic technique.

It is a result of our value of inclusiveness that we have not spurned any “neo” Gestalt therapies or banished those with whom we disagree. In fact, we have created a number of Gestalt journals with different emphases and perspectives, and engage in a process of mutual support and competition.

**Revolutionary Perspective**

The founders were revolutionaries in the true sense of the word, possessing a willingness to stand for what they believed in, even if it separated them from their cultures. They were all willing to be out of the mainstream and live with the consequences. Of equal importance, they

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2 It is well documented that Fritz Perls was shunned by Freud after writing and presenting a paper that extended the definition of resistance (see Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993).

3 There has been much written about Goodman and Laura and Fritz Perls as individuals and about their relationships with each other (for example, see Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993, Gaines, 1979, Perls, L., 1992, Perls, F. 1972, Shepard, 1975, and Stoehr, 1994).
each chose to push boundaries and had the stamina and high energy needed to turn beliefs into action.

To be a revolutionary one must live a present-centered existence. One must be able to disengage from the past, while envisioning a not-too-predictable future. The emphasis must be on the moment, the here-and-now. The founders made the focus on the present a fundamental tenet of our theory. It has allowed us to be gently removed from the past, making us environmentally sensitive and less open to stagnation. More importantly, it has resulted in Gestalt therapy’s being a therapy of social change. We are neither a prescriptive, nor an adjustment therapy. Our overriding goal is to help individuals meet their environment in a healthy way.

Optimistic View of Change

The founders were optimistic both as people and as social philosophers. They held a deep faith in the actualizing force, viewing the individual as innately capable and teachable (see Aylward, this issue, Eizner, 1999). As a result, Gestalt therapy embraces an idealistic view of the individual. Thomas, (this issue), challenges this perspective, believing this view of “natural man” to be naive. However, most Gestalt practitioners cling tenaciously to values of hope and optimism.

Our optimism is also embedded in our theory of change. We have faith in the value of not knowing. We help people become aware of what is instead of what is not, or what should be. We believe that transformation, no matter how difficult, is possible and will always occur with adequate awareness and support. These are our optimistic building blocks for change.

In sum, the founders of Gestalt therapy not only exhibited the traits necessary to lead a therapeutic revolution, they made these characteristics the foundation of the Gestalt approach. The result is a revolutionary psychotherapy grounded in optimism and inclusiveness, emphasizing the value of difference, the here and now, and authenticity of contact with one’s environment.

The Current Issue

The values that embody an inclusive philosophy, optimistic view of change, and a revolutionary perspective can be used to frame and view the current issue. We begin with Jack Aylward’s “The Contributions of Paul Goodman to the Clinical, Social, and Political Implications of Boundary Disturbances.” Aylward goes to the heart of Goodman’s view of the therapist as a revolutionary and psychotherapy as a revolutionary act.
After first outlining Goodman’s views of the self, Aylward discusses Goodman’s thoughts concerning the nature of man—that of a social animal, intersubjectively constituted. He then discusses the roots of Goodman’s social and political philosophy and ends by listing some of the implications.

Sarah and Lane Conn present a commentary on Aylward’s paper. They first define ecopsychology and articulate Gestalt therapy’s well-developed ecological perspective on health. They then focus on the non-human, natural world—an area largely ignored by both Goodman and Gestalt therapy. They end by inviting Gestalt therapists to include the ecosystem in which we live in our definition of the organismic environmental field. (See Eizner, 1999, for an excellent example of a Gestalt approach that emphasizes the ecosystem.)

Aylward, in turn responds, focusing more on contemporary political and social issues. He certainly agrees with the Conns that if one views the self as interconnected and interdependent, then we must begin to view distress—even personal disorder—within a larger, broader context. Taken as a whole, these papers demonstrate the relevance of Gestalt therapy, and Goodman in particular, to contemporary issues and dilemmas far beyond that of individual psychotherapy.

These articles leave us with a series of questions that are worthy of continued debate. Can one be healthy in a sick environment, whether we define it as intrapsychic, familial, societal, ecological or spiritual? Most would agree that living as part of a sick system, is by definition, unhealthy. However, I believe that Goodman, Aylward and the Conns would agree that living apart is also unhealthy. We are by nature social beings and when we choose or are forced to separate ourselves from our social nature, pathology is often the outcome.

Our next article is “Reflections on the Role of Psychological Theory in Psychotherapy” by Baylis Thomas. He views both psychoanalysis and Gestalt therapy as inherently reductionistic and presents concrete data that questions some of our fundamental beliefs, such as the drive towards tension reduction, and neurosis as a function of inhibition.

Thomas challenges us to look at both our theory building and our practice. He questions our willingness to accept perspectives uncritically that appear “clinically correct” or “inherently obvious” on such topics as child abuse, and the learning of racism and bigotry. In fact, although a close associate of Isadore From, he takes on one of Gestalt therapy’s sacred cows; he questions our view of the power of “unfinished business.”

Last, he points out the dilemmas posed by our theories, pseudo-theories, hidden values and assumptions as we interact with our clients. He ends with a plea to become interested in our clients’ theories.
In this article, he presents a very different view of Gestalt therapy and Paul Goodman than that of Aylward and the Conns. He believes that “Committed to the physiological, Goodman hints that his route of escape may be similar to that of the Freudian, namely, that higher motivations are sublimations of physiological drives.”

There are certain meta-questions that Thomas raises. Should our existential, phenomenological form of inquiry be held accountable to empirical criteria? Furthermore, should Goodman be viewed apart from the times in which he lived and Gestalt therapy apart from the times in which it was formulated? Last, when analyzing Gestalt therapy, how does one decide what to include and what to leave out? Is it fair to not include more recent work, to “update” the theory, so to speak? It is for you, the reader, to decide.

Our last featured article is “A Gestalt Approach to Working with the Person-Drug Relationship” by J. Richard White. This article features a Gestalt-based, phase-oriented model for working with substance abuse. In keeping with our approach, he defines substance abuse as a fixed gestalt, involving, at its core, the issue of relationship.

White challenges the American disease model of alcoholism. This model is most exemplified by Alcoholics Anonymous and its offshoots, and is wedded to a pessimistic perspective. It is based on the assumption that substance abusers, even with mass external support, cannot self regulate. Cure is defined as avoidance, and basic change is viewed with suspicion.

One of the revolutionary aspects of this paper is White’s utilization of direct here-and-now experience in the treatment of addicts. In fact, he suggests that at the end of treatment, with certain stipulations, the therapist and client risk direct contact with all relevant drug-related experiences.

Our issue ends with Back Pages featuring three in-depth book reviews. Each of these articles is much more than a description and critique of a book. Each reviewer describes a deep, personal relationship with the content, a relationship filled with wisdom, passion and belief.

This section begins with Mary Ann O’Conner’s review of Getting Beyond Sobriety: Clinical Approaches to Long-Term Recovery by Michael Craig Clemmens. While applauding Clemmens’ use of Gestalt concepts and his avoidance of labeling addiction as a personality disorder or disease, O’Conner believes that Clemmens has not gone far enough. Her perspective is more in line with that of White’s (this issue), who advocates the exploration of the drug experience itself. Furthermore, she believes that most alcohol treatment in this country is behind the times and ignores many of the creative advances in other parts of the world. She ends by outlining her position on alcoholism
based on Gestalt principles, and raises some profound and challenging questions.

Next comes Philip Lichtenberg’s review of Erving Polster’s *A Population of Selves: A Therapeutic Exploration of Personal Diversity*. Lichtenberg, after first outlining Polster’s view of the self, presents his own perspective, drawn from his work and that of others, including psychoanalysis. He then talks about the second half of the book in which Polster presents his therapeutic frame and insights that have been formed and developed during his distinguished career as a therapist, writer, theoretician and trainer.

Our issue ends with Barrie Simmons’s review of *Gestalt Therapy: The Attitude and Practice of an Atheoretical Experientialism* by Claudio Naranjo. This book is important for a number of reasons. Most significantly, Naranjo himself is an innovative thinker who has helped to expand our approach. Second, as Simmons points out, Naranjo’s work continues to be “in progress and an enlargement of Fritz Perls.” Naranjo identifies with Perls and uses many of his concepts such as “...authenticity, trust in real experience, and in sincere communication, creativity, faith in awareness as a tool and as a goal.”

At a time when some view Perls’s insights as dated, it is a pleasure to have Naranjo demonstrate his relevance to contemporary psychotherapy. And make no mistake, as Simmons points out, Naranjo talks to psychotherapy’s growing edge—the transpersonal, spiritual, and the need for change agents to view our work as always involving self-psychotherapy.

References