I do my thing, and you do your thing.  
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,  
and you are not in this world to live up to mine.  
You are you, and I am I,  
And if by chance, we find each other, it’s beautiful.  
If not, it can’t be helped [Perls, 1969]

We are pleased to feature in this issue of Gestalt Review, a focus on dependence as it exists in therapeutic and consultative relationships. This powerful emotion is experienced as both an aspect of self, “I am feeling very needy,” and of relationship, “We are emotionally dependent on each other.” Although essential for human contact, historically it has been largely devalued and under-emphasized in Gestalt circles. Instead, its opposite pole, incorporating independence, autonomy, and self-support, has received the primary interest. And while Gestalt theory emphasizes the importance of both for contact and growth to occur, this imbalance is still reflected in our practice and literature.

In order to better understand the devaluing of dependency, we must be familiar with the cultural milieu in which the Gestalt approach emerged as a potent force. It was during the 1950s, fueled by technology (e.g., the nuclear bomb, computers, television, and birth control), and a fascination with feedback and interaction, that our society became more connected and interdependent. A strong cultural norm emerged in the USA that valued individuals living their lives tightly confluent with the dominant cultural and political beliefs.¹

¹ This statement is in contrast to some Gestalt theorists who instead view this period as a time of increased individualism. I would argue that they are mistaken. Even though both the scientific and political stances of that time embraced individualism, many in the Western world led their lives feeling connected to their communities, churches, and bowling leagues.
As a result, differences, whether sexual, religious, cultural, or other, were often viewed with apprehension and, at times, hostility and even open violence.\(^2\) Gestalt therapy, along with other humanistic approaches, helped shift the pendulum from dependency and immersion in a dominant culture that did not value difference, to a focus on independence, self-support, and rebellion.

Recently, there has been more attention given to the role of dependency, if not in practice, then certainly in Gestalt writing. The numerous articles on such concepts as field theory, dialogue, and ground as opposed to figure, exemplify this fact. Furthermore, there has been an important shift of focus from the intrapsychic experience of the individual to interdependent systems, such as couples, families, teams, work groups, organizations, and cultures.

Despite this shift I believe that, as a community, we have maintained a myopic focus, preoccupied with our internal differences, overly concerned with what is wrong rather than engaging in true dialogue, management, and resolution. There is, unfortunately, too little acknowledgment within the Gestalt world that our internal differences are relatively small and insignificant when compared to our commonalities. This internal preoccupation has had many unfortunate consequences, not the least of which has been a diminishing impact within the wider therapeutic world.

As I have said previously (Melnick, 1997, 1999), we need not only pay more attention to this deeply embedded pattern, we must understand what is the resistance to joining together. We must look at our own experience, and ourselves, and at why commonalities do not seem equally as interesting and engaging as differences.\(^3\) We must learn to appreciate the “yes” and the “we” as much as the “no” and the “I.”

Unfortunately, as a small community, we are no worse at managing differences than the larger world as exemplified by the September 11\(^{th}\) tragedy. This event shattered forever whatever belief still remained regarding the independence and autonomy of countries and cultures. It brought home how our lives overlap, and how involuntarily connected and dependent we are on each other. It also heightened how poor we are at recognizing, respecting and, when problematic, resolving differences.

\(^2\) There has been much recent Gestalt writing regarding the cultural context that fueled the Gestalt approach. The interested reader of Gestalt Review can refer to Aylward (this issue). Melnick (1997) and Nevis (1997, 2001).

\(^3\) I believe that this focus on difference is, to some extent, a result of the type of individual attracted to the Gestalt approach.
It is because of the critical importance in understanding the role of dependency for world survival that I am pleased that it is being addressed in this upcoming discussion.

The Current Issue

Avrum Weiss begins this issue of *Gestalt Review* with “The Lost Role of Dependency in Psychotherapy.” While arguing for the necessity of dependency and connectedness he also addresses the negative consequences of “excessive psychological self reliance.” He confronts a series of core Western beliefs such as: maturational development as the evolution from dependence to independence and, dependence as pathological-feminine, dangerous and to be avoided. Weiss discusses the concept of mature dependency, pointing out that both dependence and independence are necessary for meaningful living.

Focusing on the psychotherapeutic relationship, he traces the history of this concept in psychological theory, and talks of the problems inherent in excessive patient dependency. He suggests that our often negative response to the dependent behavior of others might, in fact, be a result of countertransference, a function of our internal aversion to our own unresolved dependency needs. Weiss asks some provocative questions. For example, how do psychotherapists manage their dependency needs given that, historically, they have been viewed negatively, and as an aspect of countertransference? Furthermore, should we, in fact, attempt to eliminate them? He ends by presenting a case study and articulating a number of ways that the therapist is dependent on the patient.

Weiss’s essay is responded to by Mary Ann Huckabay in “The Issue of Dependency in Organizational Consultation.” She expands Weiss’s focus from therapist/patient to consultant/organizational client, eloquently describing the dependency dynamic embedded in the consultative relationship. One difference between therapy and consultation, for example, is that in psychotherapy, exploring dependency–independence dynamics is often a major goal. However, in business relationships, feelings around dependency are almost never the content. They are only relevant in relation to achieving some well-articulated goals. Huckabay does a masterful job of describing the many organizational forces that stimulate dependency in the organizational consultant.

The issue of dependency is also addressed by Robert Lee in “Ethics: A Gestalt of Values/The Values of Gestalt” He addresses dependency from an ethical perspective, critically looking at the consequences of a Gestalt tradition that maximizes individualization and differentiates person and environment. Lee frames his views with a focus on the
concept of connection/disconnection, as understood from a field perspective. After developing a number of principles, he ends by describing the field conditions necessary for healthy self-process. Lee adds significantly to the ongoing discussion in Gestalt circles as to whether our process-oriented perspective is adequate to generate a meaningful ethical stance or must borrow from other theoretical orientations (cf., Wheeler, 1992; Melnick, Nevis and Melnick, 1994; Gremmler-Fuhr, 2001).

Surprisingly, and in contrast to other depth therapies such as Jungian and psychoanalysis, Gestalt theory has rarely been applied to literature. This is one of the reasons that I am pleased to present Norman Friedman’s pioneering article, “A Gestalt of Literature,” in which he utilizes poetry to illustrate the universality of certain Gestalt concepts. More specifically, he analyzes the relationship between the Gestalt therapy change process, as articulated by Perls, and the organization of poems.

It is not surprising that Friedman picks the genre of lyric poetry for his analysis and demonstration. Poetry, like the Gestalt approach, eschews the purely intellectual, valuing instead the creation of experience in multiple, and often surprising and delightful ways.

Back Pages, as usual, is filled with stimulating and provocative writings. We begin with a powerful essay, “Fritz Redux” by Jack Aylward. Aylward bemoans Perls’s relegation by some members of the Gestalt community to that of an important ancestor, through the minimization and, at times, distortion of his important and valuable contributions. Drawing on the work of Narranjo, Aylward joins with Friedman in emphasizing the value of many of Perls’s theoretical contributions to the Gestalt approach. He implores us to see the brilliant work of his therapy and embrace the powerful theory that transcends time and current styles and values.

Following Aylward is Reinhard Fuhr’s “Buber–Rogers: A Seminal Misunderstanding.” His essay is the second commentary on the recently published Buber/Rogers dialogues. Fuhr deconstructs the philosophical and therapeutic stances of these great men, analyzing their theories from five perspectives. His analysis gets at the core of their differences. I believe that you will find this essay of interest whether you are familiar with these influential thinkers or not. I would recommend that as you read this essay you experiment with placing yourself along each of the dimensions discussed by Fuhr.

We are pleased to end Back Pages with the initiation of a new book review format in which we periodically invite authors to respond to reviews of their books. In this case Jay Éarley responds to Bud Feder’s

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4 The interested reader is referred to Greenberg (2001).
review of Interactive Group Therapy: Integrating Interpersonal, Action-Oriented and Psychodynamic Approaches. In this lively dialogue both writers grapple with important issues, such as what is and is not Gestalt therapy, and the role of awareness in our work.

There are so many places in the world where people, bound by geography, are struggling to live together. It is disappointing that Gestalt practice and theory, that has so much to offer, has not contributed more to the knowledge of how to join and resolve differences. As stated previously, one key reason has been our historical lack of attention to dependence, interdependence, and mutual dependency. I am encouraged that Gestaltists are beginning to address this issue, and am hopeful that this can be the start of an ongoing dialogue.

References


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