EDITORIAL
Conflict

JOSEPH MELNICK, PH.D.

Conflict is everywhere. It exists within us, with our most intimate others, within groups and subgroups of organizations, and, of course, between large entities such as tribes, clans and countries. Conflict is simply a basic aspect of human experience. However, when conflict escalates out of control and there is a lack of closure or resolution, it is destructive. The Gestalt approach has a lot to say about conflict, which is, at its core, an inability to manage difference effectively. Managing differences is fundamental to the Gestalt approach, for we believe that learning can occur only at the boundary (the difference) between the self and the other.

We begin this issue of *Gestalt Review* with a dialogue concerning one of the most widely used approaches to managing conflict, *mediation*. In her lead article, Lisa Gaynier describes conflict as a crisis in human interaction—a crisis with a common and predictable character (p. 180). I have taken her description of some of the characteristics of long-term conflict and expanded it below.

- A destabilization of the parties' experience of both self and other. I don't know who I am in relation to you and me.
- The parties are more vulnerable and self-absorbed. There is a focus on the "I" and little awareness of the "We."
- There is a sense of being caught up in the negative interaction, a downward spiral. This often includes a blaming of the other and a fixed pattern of interaction that neither person can break.
- There is a lack of safety and trust-trust of self, of the other, of the process, and of the next moment.
- There is little understanding of the interconnectedness and dependency of the two parts. Instead, the focus is on differences.

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• There is a diminishment of curiosity and real interest in the other.
• Resolution skills are few and ineffective.

From a Gestalt perspective, conflict may be defined as *two different figures* (worldviews, perceptions of reality, etc.) *that occupy the same place at the same time.* When embraced, this field perspective moves us away from blame, from right and wrong, and from the labeling of the other as "resistant." This perspective enables us to see the world as made up of *multiple realities.*

Some of my most important learning with respect to conceptualizing and dealing with conflict occurred during my initial training in Gestalt therapy. We were taught to work with the intrapsychic polarities within individuals, and utilized Perl's paradigm of Top Dog/Underdog (1969). We learned to see the splits in the individual and were taught to help the client separate and give voice to the warring factions. Our usual method was to have the client role-play each part by alternating between chairs and by having the two sides dialogue with each other.

We were to notice the process, most importantly how the parts spoke to each other. What emerged was highly predictable. There was usually a dismissive righteousness on both sides, a great deal of blaming and finger pointing (*i.e.*, reference to you) a fast pace, little listening, and few real questions. As the therapist, my goal was to help the parts achieve contact so that they could work together to create a richer and more peaceful integration and co-existence.

The top dog was much like the Freudian Superego, consisting of the shoulds, should nots, and introjects handed down from family and society. When compared to underdog, top dog was usually more overt, more figural, more known, and more in the world. Top dog, as the name implies, had the power to move things forward, to make things happen.

The underdog was similar to the Freudian Id, and represented raw, repressed spontaneity. The initial sense of underdog being weak, whiny and powerless often turned out to be an illusion, for underdog also had tremendous power, the power to sabotage and stop the action.

I learned a most important lesson from my work as a fledgling Gestalt practitioner. It takes two to resolve an issue and only one to keep resolution from happening.

Gestalt therapy has continued to expand and grow, and so has our ability to work with conflict at other levels of systems. Not surprisingly, in our work with couples and with dyads in organizations, we find the same patterns. It always takes two to move forward, no matter what the perceived power differential, and only one to stop the action.

We have expanded our approach to systems, with different forms and structures, during the ensuing years.[1] Rather than becoming less relevant, I find the concept of top dog–underdog to be even more valuable.

So, what can Gestalt therapy add to our understanding of the causes as well as the resolution of conflict? First, as Perls knew, we have to learn to

value diversity and love difference. We have to learn to be curious about others, to move toward them rather than away from them. And last, as Lichtenberg (1990; Lichtenberg, van Beusekom, and Gibbons, 1997), and others have reminded us, we must be suspicious of confluence and sameness, for without differences, (yes, and without conflict), there is no growth.

OUR CURRENT ISSUE

In this issue of *Gestalt Review*, we are pleased to feature two in-depth discussions. The first is Lisa Gaynier's "In Search of a Theory of Practice: What Does Gestalt Have to Offer the Field of Mediation?" with commentaries by Ann Begler and Sally Higginbotham. In this wide-ranging debate, all three writers compare and contrast a Gestalt perspective with other forms of mediation, primarily transformative. They address such broad issues as *presence, bias,* and *use* of self.

In addition to their thorough discussion of the mediation process, they raise important practical issues regarding training, credentialing, and the overall control of this blossoming field. In her response to the commentaries, Gaynier questions what type of credentials and training mediators will need in order to function in the future. She also raises the issue of whether formal training (usually legal training) does, in fact, add to one's ability to mediate or detract from it.

This debate reminds me of the one that has been going on for decades within the psychotherapy field. Not only are there control struggles between the major professions (psychology, social work, psychiatry, etc.) and different therapeutic orientations (Gestalt, psychoanalysis, cognitive, etc.), but real questions as to whether formal academic training does, in fact, add to one's ability to do psychotherapy.

Our second dialogue discusses adolescent development. Peter Mortola and Jay Levin comment on Mark McConville's "Lewinian Field Theory, Adolescent Development and Psychotherapy." In order to be credible, all psychotherapy theories must be able to articulate how individuals change and develop over time. There have been many debates within Gestalt circles as to whether our theory of development is adequate enough to support informed action, or do we need to go outside a Gestalt frame to shore up a weak link in our approach? I believe that McConville has put this issue to rest by clearly demonstrating that a Gestalt model based on the Lewinian field approach results in an elegant and relevant developmental theory. He makes field theory come alive in his story of two adolescents.

This is a wonderful article filled with a master clinician's insights. Mortola and Levin, excellent developmental theoreticians as well as specialists in children and adolescent therapy respectively, add their powerful insights and perspectives.

These two dialogues are followed by Rick Maurer's "The Use of Paradoxical Theory of Change in Organizations." This interesting and informative article links Beisser's well-known ideas on change to organizational work. Maurer presents a clear and simple summary of how Gestalt theory can be applied seamlessly to larger systems.

Gestalt therapy has many roots. We have presented articles in the past that link Gestalt therapy to many traditions and systems of thought (cf. Bocian, 1998; Meara, 2000; Mortola, 2000; and Baker, 2001). One of the most controversial links, not only in Gestalt therapy but also in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy in general, has been the influence of the Jewish tradition. In "The Jewish Roots of Gestalt Therapy," Ernst Knijff describes how this tradition's worldview is embedded in the Gestalt approach. Filled with insight and humor, this provocative article will stimulate you, the reader.

Back Pages, as usual, is filled with a rich blend of essays. It includes Peter Schulthess' overview of Gestalt therapy in Switzerland and Carmen Vázquez Bandin's thought-provoking impressions of Gestalt therapy in Spain. This is followed by Sharona Halpern's personal reflection on the death of a client.

We end this issue, much as we began, by looking at conflict. Susan Partridge reviews Lichtenberg, van Beusekom, and Gibbons' book, *Encountering Bigotry: Befriending Projecting Persons in Everyday Life.* While praising the book, she reminds us of the many potential roots of bigotry, and the difficulty with finding ways to deal with conflict effectively. Her analysis of the book's many strengths and few weaknesses is thoughtful and proactive. She imagines using the authors' recommended techniques on a daily basis, while examining her own style and limitations and the drawbacks of strategies. Finally, she applauds the authors' success in bringing the issue of bigotry out of the closet and offering a beginning—with a Gestalt bent—on how to face, reduce, and perhaps end bigotry, one person and one system at a time.

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Endnote
[1]For example, see the groundbreaking work of Lichtenberg and his colleagues (Lichtenberg, 1990; Lichtenberg, van Beusekon, & Gibbons, 1997) regarding bigotry and prejudice in society and everyday life; Copsey and Bar-Yoseph's work with different religious and cultural groups in Great Britain (1999); and Saner and Saner-Yiu (2002) on their large systems work with the United Nations.

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