Introduction

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I can draw a direct, albeit not straight, line between this moment as I begin to write this introduction for this special issue of Gestalt Review and a moment in time in Seattle, Washington in 2003. I was attending the National Multicultural Summit and was in the audience for a panel discussion among several distinguished “elders,” who were pioneers in the development of the multicultural counseling movement. I sensed a kinship in that group’s struggle for recognition in the 1970s and Gestalt therapy’s loss of recognition and respect in the US since the 1970s. Then, there was a distinct “key change” when one of those elders made a sweeping declaration that the majority of the traditional psychotherapies that had been developed in the 1940s through the 1960s were not appropriate for work with “clients of color.” Another panel member followed that comment and called out Gestalt therapy as a particularly egregious approach due to the cultural insensitivity of techniques like the empty chair, the philosophy of individualism (evidenced so starkly in the Perls's prayer), and its confrontational overtones. My sense of kinship dissipated rapidly, replaced by one of confusion and incipient outrage. The words “but wait a minute” formed on my lips, but I had no chance to organize my rebuttal before the session ended.

It was not the first time that I found myself at a conference or presentation and cringed when a speaker characterized Gestalt therapy in an unbalanced or

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totally inaccurate way. On that occasion though, my dismay was compounded because there were several hundred graduate students and new professionals in the audience, and it was my perception that they were engulfed in a transferential fog and introjecting the words of wisdom of those elders. Although I was not able to formulate an in-the-moment response, I left that conference determined to find a forum to make a case for Gestalt therapy to be in the conversation as an approach for serious consideration for psychotherapy with diverse clients. After all, we have field theory, which requires we conceptualize every client in context, and we have phenomenological inquiry, which inspires us to lead with curiosity, not judgment or a rush to objectify.

In 2005, I embarked on what became an epic voyage into uncharted waters. At that time, I was determined to find a means to promote Gestalt therapy as a relevant theoretical orientation and a culturally sensitive therapy for an increasingly diverse population of clients (and practitioners). Initially, my idea was to write an article. I reached out to one prominent multicultural counseling pioneer for guidance about where I might submit my article for publication. He suggested I develop a book. If I was going to make a case for Gestalt therapy and its appropriateness for diverse clients, why not invite practitioners from other psychotherapy orientations to do the same?

Since the publication in 2008 of my book, Contemporary Psychotherapies for a Diverse World, I have continued to examine the intersections of Gestalt therapy and the disciplines of multicultural counseling and intercultural communication. That examination has been promoted and informed by my experiences as a Gestalt therapy trainer, teacher, and supervisor. The students whom I have had the privilege to introduce to Gestalt therapy over the past 15 years are “diverse” (in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.), as are the clients they serve. They are excited about Gestalt therapy and are quick to realize that aspects of the theory and practice need to be revisited, and possibly revised, to fit the more “colorful” world they will be practicing in for decades to come.

More recently, I found myself pondering how to initiate a dialogue in the Gestalt community about how aspects of Gestalt therapy theory and practice would benefit from reexamination given the context now. I contacted editor Susan L. Fischer in November of 2015 and pitched the idea of a special issue

1The book is unusual in this way: in the past there were two types of academic texts in the US. In the first psychotherapy theories would be covered chapter by chapter sometimes by one author or “expert” authors. Best examples are editions by Gerald Corey (2013) and Corsini and Wedding (2008). In those books diversity is rarely mentioned and, if so, in a paragraph near the end of each chapter. Then there are multicultural counseling books, for example, Sue and Sue (1977, 2003), which may or may not cover traditional counseling theories. Students would usually be required to by one of each. My book combines the concepts. I recruited expert authors for each theory, but their charge was to describe their theory then and now and to emphasis how the theory has been modified for a diverse world. All case examples had to be about non-majority clients.
of Gestalt Review in 2016 to correspond with the 20th anniversary of its inception. To my knowledge, there has never been a journal edition in any of the Gestalt journals published around the world dedicated to the topic of diversity. Fischer was enthusiastic in her response and gave me the green light to go ahead with the project.

My first task was to identify and recruit authors/practitioners to contribute to the effort. I had several in mind. Then I had a mini “aha.” I realized that I would prefer to collaborate with a coguest creator, someone to help with the recruitment process, who would support authors as they wrote and work with me on initial comments and edits when articles were first submitted. And, I thought, someone who is not a white male.

Although I had never met nor spoken to her, I immediately thought of Deborah Plummer. For many years, I have used the Woldt and Toman (2005) Gestalt Therapy book in a class I teach each summer at Pacific University on Gestalt therapy. Sabin Fernbacher and Plummer had coauthored a chapter in that book on cultural considerations. I did some research and discovered common paths: Plummer and I both received our doctoral degrees in Counseling Psychology from Kent State University; we were both mentored in that program by Ansel Woldt; we both completed the Three-Year-Post-Graduate training program at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (with a specialization in group work). I contacted Plummer and she graciously agreed both to write for the special issue and to work with me as guest cocreator. We were fortunate to assemble seven additional practitioners/authors who were eager to join us and to bring their perspectives on clinical and organizational/systems applications of Gestalt in this increasingly diverse world.

I begin this issue invoking a central concept of Gestalt therapy. In “Gestalt Therapy: Creatively Adjusting in an Increasingly Diverse World,” I assert that aspects of Gestalt therapy must be reexamined and modified to adjust creatively to the context now. To neglect this task is to doom our approach to creeping marginalization—a slow fade into psychotherapy history books and irrelevance, given the rapidly changing “face” of our own practitioners and our clients. I review three fields or movements—social justice, multicultural counseling, and psychotherapy—and intercultural communication, and discuss intersections between them and Gestalt therapy. Finally, I integrate selected concepts from Gestalt therapy then and now with concepts from intercultural communication. Based on the premise that all interpersonal contact is intercultural contact, I propose that the field of intercultural communication can be a promising ally as we engage in flexing Gestalt therapy to be attuned to our more diverse world.

The premise presented in the introduction of “Racial Identity Resolution Process: A Gestalt Perspective,” is that the United States is comprised of the
widest and richest diversity in the world. Yet, we do not take advantage of that racial diversity to create “an informed, inclusive citizenry.” Deborah Plummer, with Sabin Fernbacher offering a more global perspective as a respondent, discusses how Gestalt therapy provides insight into why we remain segregated as racial beings and resist diversity. In this article, the construct of “use-of-self” is explicated, and Plummer outlines how it can be employed in a process that supports healthy racial identity resolution. The concept of “unconscious bias” is also explored. Informed by Gestalt principals, unconscious bias can shift to unconscious awareness when interacting in a multiracial environment. Fernbacher’s comments throughout add breadth and examples from her own racial identity development journey in Australia.

In 2000, Lynne Jacobs wrote a compelling and self-reflective article entitled, “For Whites Only.” She revisits this topic and expands on it in “Dialogue and Double Consciousness: Lessons in Power and Humility.” She states that “we do not talk much about power in Gestalt therapy” and explores what she terms “hard stuff,” like white ignorance and white power. She compares the relative comfort, sense of belonging, and central social location that comes with whiteness and being of the dominant culture with what W. E. B. DuBois (1903) called “double consciousness,” or a poignant aspect of the phenomenology of black Americans: being “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (p. 3). She concludes with what, as a white therapist, she tries to do in the consulting room to live with the “double consciousness” that DuBois could not escape.

Workplaces both in and outside of the United States have also diversified and become more multicultural. Herb Stevenson differentiates between diversity and inclusion and outlines core concepts of the Gestalt consulting stance in “Awareness and Emergence: The Gestalt Approach to Global Diversity and Inclusion.” He asserts that diversity initiatives in the contemporary organization are typically limited to race, ethnicity, and gender, and seek to mold attitudes and behaviors to fit with prevailing nationalistic values. Inclusion efforts employ a wider lens going beyond obvious differences and are designed to encourage differences to be accepted and embraced without reshaping values and behaviors. Stevenson suggests that, through the practice of the Gestalt consulting stance, Gestalt consultants “will be in a strong position to support individual and organizational awareness. . . as well as the humane imperative for inclusion.”

Greer Jordan and Tim Ewing also take up the topics of diversity and inclusion in their article, “Approaches to Diversity and Inclusion and Practice as Informed by Gestalt Training.” These authors received their training in Gestalt therapy and organizational development more recently and bring a fresh set of perspectives to their paper. They point out that, in the past, many work
organizations simply excluded individuals whose differences were out of step with dominant organizational values or utilized policies and procedures to force assimilation. Inclusion involves confronting and integrating differences after diversity management tactics have been tried. Like Herb Stevenson, they believe that Gestalt consultants are uniquely qualified to facilitate a process in which there is respect for what each employee brings to workplace interactions, and that respect for differences leads to real time inclusion and unanticipated possibilities.

Lalei Gutierrez and Philip Belzunce bring their voices to this special issue in a reflection entitled, “Interactive Use-of-Self: Diversity, Immigration, and Religion.” In this poignant piece, they relate a story of being greeted to the United States by individual and systematic racism, classism, and ethnocentrism. They navigated these forces by employing the individual support of their rich religious and spiritual beliefs, the environmental support and safety of their Gestalt community, and their partnership as a couple. They conclude by stating that, “losing the old and familiar supports of family, country, community, and church opened a rich ground of diversity.”

I am very excited about this number of Gestalt Review and hope that it will stimulate more dialogue about how Gestalt therapy can continue to evolve and creatively adjust to the rapidly changing world around us. In closing, I want to thank Susan Fischer for her confidence and trust to allow me to take a lead in the development of this issue. And, of course, my gratitude to Deborah Plummer for partnering with me in this endeavor and her help in gathering so many talented practitioners. Finally, my appreciation to all the authors who agreed to bring their experiences and perspectives to bear on this important topic.

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REFERENCES