GESTALT WITH GROUPS: A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

An increasing awareness of cultural differences (rather than the more politically correct “diversity,” which is more related to multicultural societies) is raising issues in many fields concerning the inappropriateness of applying concepts undiluted from one culture to another. Post-colonial sensitivities are part of this dynamic. This article explores some cultural concepts in the context of groups and group work, links this to a Gestalt perspective, and raises issues potentially important to Gestalt therapists, trainers, and OSD consultants working internationally.

Setting the Scene: Some Cross-Cultural Incidents in Groups

I am working on a faculty team with a large multicultural group, with self-selected Process Groups. (Both the choice of self-selected groups, as well as the whole self-selection process, are examples of cross-cultural issues). I am facilitating a Process Group during its first two meetings. At the end of the second session, a Ghanaian man says: “This group is my family here, you are all my cousins.” He otherwise had been mostly silent, though attentive, throughout both sessions.

Another example: I am working with a multicultural student group that includes a number of Italians. Whenever any of these Italian students asks a question, it is gener-
ally either the eldest male (considered and respectful questions), the female from the highest-status family (intellectually challenging questions), or the youngest (playful, light-hearted questions). The same applies to Mexican, Spanish, and Latin American students. These students ask questions on each others’ behalf, the questioner turning towards a fellow student as I respond.

And yet another example: I am working with multicultural Process Groups in which the opening format is to elicit statements beginning with “I want” and “We need.” This is to raise awareness with respect to individual and group issues. For North Americans and Northern Europeans, the “I want” comes easily, and the “We need” is either a variation on “I want” or, alternatively, a cognitive statement reflecting the individual’s knowledge of group development models. For Africans and Asians, for example, the “We need” statement often comes first, and the “I want” statement is a reinforcement of it.

And here is a favorite example of mine: I am working with a group of 21 senior managers in Tehran, Iran. Eleven of them have the name “Mohammed” printed on their Western-style name cards. It is the second week of Ramadan, and we have rescheduled the program to allow for their prayer times. The atmosphere is warm, friendly, respectful. I risk a remark: “If I ever get stuck, and don’t know what to say, all I have to do is ask, ‘What do you think, Mohammed?’ and I will get 11 people ready to answer.” They all laugh and start talking animatedly with each other.

Background

All of my work—therapeutic, training, organizational and academic—is cross-cultural and in two languages, English and Swedish. I work with culturally homogenous groups of cultures different from my own, and with multicultural groups of up to 80 students from some 20 to 25 cultures.

I have been aware for some time of the inadequacy of culture-bound group theories and models when dealing with diverse groups. The widely-used group dynamics and developmental models are invariably American in origin and certainly Anglo-Saxon in focus, terminology, and exemplification and, increasingly, they seem to me to be so grounded in the cultural contexts of their origin that their applicability in a wider context is limited. As a result, I have been working on finding a less culture-bound ground for exploring group development and the concomitant dynamics for cross-cultural and multicultural settings.

This is the main focus of this article. My hypothesis is that a Gestalt-based model can be the support I need. In other words, a further aim of this article is to examine the cross-cultural aspects of working with groups in the context of a Gestalt approach.

Let me open by establishing some working hypotheses around the construct “culture.” This section is followed by some thoughts on Gestalt and culture, as well as my own links to both fields—thus establishing some of the cultural lenses that color my view of my environment. I will then move into a more detailed exposition of the main themes of this article.
Culture?

A colleague of mine who researches cross-cultural organizational issues has currently a collection of almost 400 definitions of “culture!” Since it is not my intention to explore the theme of culture other than in the context of this article, I therefore will attempt to keep such discussions open to the informed amateur, rather than the professional in the field. My focus here is on culture at a national and/or ethnic level, sometimes bounded by a common language. As such, “culture” here is definable as recognizable, internalized patterns of behavior internal to a bounded collection of people, and also patterns of behavior used in their external environment. In other words, the behaviors we naturally use within our own cultural environments, and those we expect from others within our own cultural environments, as well as the behaviors we collectively use in relation to other cultural environments. To a greater or lesser extent—itself culturally influenced—a person can exhibit these patterns if behaving in a cultural environment other than their own. To a greater or lesser extent, we are, each of us, representative of our original cultural environments. Typically, these patterns are more obvious to an other-culture observer than to a member of the culture concerned. In Gestalt terms, culture is a primary introject, and can soon become the ground for our primary collective projections onto other cultures.

At the same time, if alone in another cultural environment, an individual may behave somewhat differently than if he or she were one of a number members of the same culture in this new environment. I have noticed, for example, how my own behavior as an Irishman will shift gear when there are other Irish people present, and have seen this happening to others. There is also the interesting observation that, for some cultures, a lone individual is rarely seen: the norm here would be a group from that culture.

Cross-Cultural Context #1: Defining Identity

I have chosen three dimensions or aspects of culture as being particularly relevant to the subject of groups, as well as being readily accessible to a reader not especially well-versed in cross-cultural studies and research. These are individualism, familism, and collectivism. Two of these—Individualism and Collectivism—are well-established cultural constructs (Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars, 1993). The third—Familism—was introduced to me by Annick Sjögren (1990), a French ethnologist residing and performing research in Sweden for many years. The term also was used by Marin (1994), though named “Familialism.” Hofstede (2001) now includes a variation of this perspective as a consequence of specific combinations of his other dimensions.

I will add three sub-constructs, the first acknowledged in the research, the other two more intuitive and grounded in my reading and experience: the sub-construct of Familism with Collectivism, which I call “Embedded Familism”; that is, Familism embedded in a collective; and “Bounded Individualism”; that is, Individualism bounded by the family. The variation “Embedded Individualism” is my attempt to describe and understand Scandinavian cultures, in particular Swedish culture—strong on individual rights and equality issues, and equally strong on individual adherence to collectively-
accepted norms and rules of behavior.

Here is a brief description of core issues for each, with suggestions for examples taken from the literature (with the intuitive exceptions of “Bounded Individualism” and “Embedded Individualism”):

**INDIVIDUALISM:** Identity is self-defined, also interpersonally defined. Membership of any sort is largely voluntary, and often strategically chosen. (USA, Australia, Great Britain, Northern Continental Europe)

**FAMILISM:** Identity is defined by family membership, family status, sibling position, and responsibilities. Other memberships are usually in the context of family. (Jewish tradition, Mediterranean area, Arab cultures, Iran)

**COLLECTIVISM:** Identity is in group membership, which becomes a “given.” Group is embedded in the larger social collective. (Japan, Korea)

**EMBEDDED FAMILISM:** The family is embedded in other social structures; for example, clan and tribe, which, in turn, are embedded in the collective of an ethnic group in a defined geographical area. Or, the family is embedded in segregated social strata. (West/South/East Africa, China, India)

**BOUNDED INDIVIDUALISM:** Identity is in family membership (etc. as above), with family-supported latitude for the family member to individually explore the environment. (Ireland, Israel)

**EMBEDDED INDIVIDUALISM:** Identity is self-defined, although also defined and constrained by the surrounding socio-cultural environment. (Scandinavia)

As macro-level constructs, these nevertheless provide a solid ground for distinctions in cross-cultural attitudes and behaviors in groups. It is immediately noticeable that the “Group and Team” industry, both theoretically and through countless training programs, originates in Individualistic cultures. In the cultures of Embedded Individualism, it is of primary importance that a method or theory is made culturally congruent, or at least culturally acceptable, before individuals will subscribe to them (see example below). In my experience of working multiculturally, people from Embedded FAMILISTIC and Collectivistic cultures have little or no need for training in group membership and leadership along Individualistic lines. (Something similar—though distinctive—applies to people in FAMILISTIC cultures; more later). They behave in cultures in which much about groups is “given” and accepted as the cultural norm. Personal sub-optimization in a group setting is also normal, rather than an individual choice in a strategic context, as it can be in more Individualistic cultures. As a consequence, models of group development and dynamics, grounded in one cultural context, may not necessarily be equally valid in others. This is certainly my experience. For example, working with a multicultural student group, the variety of reactions and competencies
displayed when students are assigned project groups is fascinating—and culturally congruent. Any attempt to apply Western developmental and leadership models fails dismally—and I have tried them all! As a result, I now work from the above constructs, and find that most students are able to relate to them.

**Cross-Cultural Incidents Revisited**

To return to the end of the second process group session, when a Ghanaian Ashanti man says: “This group is my family here, you are all my cousins”—and otherwise, he had been silent, though attentive—this latter behavior fits well with the description of an “intelligent person” amongst the Yoruba, another West African tribe:

First, there is the admiration for the individual who does more listening than talking ... (who) is believed to be taking in the issues under discussion ... (this) wise person listens patiently and speaks only when all views ... have been expressed. Second, there is the respect ... given to the person who ... can respond by placing the issue in its proper cultural context [Durojaiye, 1993].

I know and respect many Gestalt colleagues who would have intervened around this man’s silence—as seen from the perspective of Individualism. Seen through the lenses of Embedded Familism, his behavior is admirable. A further point: Working on the same program, an older and much-respected colleague of mine has been called “Grandfather” and I “Uncle” by younger South African women.

Regarding the student group and the Italians, these behaviors are typical of Familism, with patterns of sibling position.

As to the different behaviors with respect to “I want” and “We need,” this would seem to confirm the research referenced in Triandis (1994):

...[W]e asked various samples of individuals in different parts of the world to complete 20 sentences that start with “I am”… we found that in collectivist cultures many of the sentence completions implied a group. For example, “I am a son” clearly reflects family; “I am a Roman Catholic” clearly reflects religion (group). On the other hand, such statements were rare in individualistic cultures...where people referred mostly to personal traits and conditions, e.g., “I am kind” or “I am tired.” If we take the percent of group-related answers obtained from Illinois students as the basis, we found students of Chinese or Japanese background in Hawaii giving twice as many group-related responses, and students in the Peoples’ Republic of China giving three times as many such responses.

Again, imagine the impact of any intervention with only an Individualistic focus. My own work in such a group raises awareness concerning the two perspectives—the individual and the group—and supports mutual respect.
With respect to my 11 Mohammeds, the issue was beautifully, warmly, and humorously resolved. The morning after my comment, one of the two group “mediators” (who was best in English, and most experienced in working abroad) said that one of the Mohammeds had something to say. The oldest man in the room, and most senior company chairperson, rose and said: “Professor Seán, about what you said yesterday. When you say ‘what do you think, Mohammed?’, then I, Mohammed the Elder, will stand up and point to him, Mohammed the Youngest, and say—you, answer the professor!” The whole room erupted into loud laughter, and happy conversation. “Families, you know,” my mediator said to me. “That’s exactly how it works here.”

Cross-Cultural Context #2: Communication

Edward Hall (Hall & Hall, 1990) introduced the concept of “high context” and “low context” cultures, specifically in relation to communication. By “high context” he means cultures in which most of the meaning of a communication is in the cultural context—the participants responding to a shared meaning-making. In “low context” cultures, each speaker needs to be explicit about the intended meaning of a communication. This is highly relevant to group facilitation in both homogenous and heterogeneous cultural settings.

The usual examples are:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIGH CONTEXT</th>
<th>LOW CONTEXT</th>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
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In other words, working with homogenous groups from a high context culture other than our own, we as facilitators can expect that much of what is happening is beyond our comprehension. This certainly reflects my experience in Italy, and more so in Finland. A favorite moment with a multicultural group in Italy was when, with the assistance of the Italians, we arrived at 15 ways of saying “yes” (“sí”), only one of which actually meant “yes” in the sense that, for example, U.S and German participants could understand! The Italians had no difficulties distinguishing among them—we others were regularly perplexed. The meaning of “sí” is contextual, and clearly dependant on the perception of the Italian listeners and their natural ability to make the appropriate shared meaning.

Another favorite was the occasion I worked myself to a standstill for two days with a group of silent Finnish managers, who ended by saying (through their CEO) that their sessions with me were “okay”—which I know to be about the highest praise possible from a group of Finns.
We need to be mindful that Gestalt, in its German and Jewish origins and American development, is grounded in low context cultures of Individualism/Bounded Individualism, in which being explicit is the cultural norm. Let us not apply this as a universal norm.

Cross-Cultural Context # 3: Boundaries

In my cross-cultural teaching, I often use Lewin’s (1948) model of a distinction between Americans and Germans, focused on the individual’s boundaries between the private and the public. If Americans and Germans were avocados, then the American would have a lot of permeable flesh around a small, hard and almost impermeable kernel. The German would have a smaller amount of permeable flesh, and a larger kernel. Lewin’s point was the distinction between the boundaries of the public and the private between the two cultures.

I recently read a fascinating piece of mini-research in the cross-cultural field. Shamir and Melnik (2002) propose “Boundary Permeability as a Cultural Dimension,” referring in their article to Lewin’s work (see above). They distinguish between permeable and rigid boundaries, and relate their model to the seminal cross-cultural work of Hofstede (2001), Trompenaars (1993), and Hall and Hall (1990). Taking the essential cultural dimensions from each author’s model, they apply their boundary concept (“permeable” versus “rigid”) to each end of the proposed dimensional continuum. They find that there is a sufficient match to be able to support their proposal. In other words, they present a model of cultures based on boundary issues in relation to both the internal and external cultural environments; that is, a recognizable collective pattern of behavior.

This resonated with my experience, and supported the notion of a relatively culture-free group development model. To clarify this point, let me return to the cross-cultural model I presented earlier, and add the boundary dimensions for each.

Individualism: person/environment
Familism: person/family; family/kith and kin; kith and kin/socio-cultural environment
Collectivism: person/group; group/other groups; group/socio-cultural environment
Embedded Familism: person/family; family/clan; clan/ethnic group; ethnic group/environment
Bounded Individualism: person/family; person/environment
Embedded Individualism: person as member of a socio-cultural environment/environment

A further aspect is that, in the cases of Familism, Collectivism, and Embedded Familism, the person generally represents most or all of the other levels, even in that person’s boundary, with any environment; for example, family honor, clan loyalty, ethnic tradition. I recently experienced an expression of this: I was working in Toronto,
and received a present from a Ghanaian Ashanti colleague of a woven scarf with his tribal motif on it. Later in the week, a taxi pulled up in front of me and the driver jumped out and greeted me joyously. He recognized the motif, was from the same tribe, and simply wanted to meet me. When he heard that my colleague was nearby, he dropped everything to meet him. I felt that I had been greeted by the whole tribe.

The idea of boundaries as a cultural dimension reinforced my thinking that a group developmental model, based on contact modalities at any and all of the group boundaries, could be the culture-free perspective I was looking for.

The Cross-Cultural Roots of Gestalt

From any number of perspectives, Gestalt is a synthesis of cultural influences: from pre- and post-World War I academic Germany, to apartheid South Africa, to post-World War II USA, and then back to its European roots; a strong Jewish tradition flavored by theistic and atheistic European Existentialism, as well as Yoga and Zen from India and Japan; and the sweeping universalism of: “[W]e believe that the Gestalt outlook is the original, natural undistorted approach to life; that is, to man’s thinking, acting, feeling.” (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951). Added to this is the absence of any central and hierarchical Gestalt organization as “keepers of the truth.” Each Institute forms its own figure from what was once one of two grounds—the original New York Institute and/or Fritz Perls later doing his own, very accomplished, thing. Out of the meetings of the various American Gestalt organisms with the environments of Western Europe and Latin America, for example, there emerged new figures in the various cultural contexts involved. Both American and Western European Gestaltists are now active in training institutes in Eastern Europe and beyond, where the same organic process of mutually-influenced figure formation is alive and well.

Groups: An Introduction

My working hypothesis for “what is a group” is three or more people: a) defined by the environment as a group, and/or b) defined by themselves, individually and/or collectively, as a group. The group development process is essentially the self-definition process of a group. The smaller the group, the more explicit this process can be, expressed in the dynamics at the individual, interpersonal, and sub-group levels of the group as system. There is general agreement among theorists that up to eight members is a small group, from eight to twelve or fifteen is a median group and, beyond that, a large group. The larger the group, the more likely it is that the dynamics are played out at a sub-group level, sometimes expressed through what may appear to be interpersonal issues. Culturally homogenous groups of any size are likely to support behaviors congruent with the shared culture. In multicultural groups, cross-cultural sub-group issues are likely to be evident. Where the self-defining development process is concerned, culturally homogenous groups will have established patterns. In multicultural groups, these patterns will exist at the cultural sub-group level which, in turn, will influence the direction, pace, and dynamics of the developmental process. In other words, the
developmental process of the group-as-a-whole will be a function and/or a synthesis of a variety of sub-group processes.

Again, my hypothesis is that models that are congruent with any particular cultural context may not necessarily be relevant in another. Also, these models are inappropriate to the complexities of multicultural groups.

**Gestalt with Groups**

Apart from the widely-known synthesis of developmental models by Tuckman (1965), working from a Gestalt perspective in and with groups has inevitably led to proposals compatible with a Gestalt approach. Three models predominate, those of Kepner (1980), Huckabay (1992), Schutz (1958), and Yalom (1975). Here is a summary:

| Tuckman: Forming Storming Norming Performing Adjourning |
| Kepner: Identity Influence Intimacy |
| Schutz: Inclusion Control Affection/Openness |
| Yalom: Orientation Conflict High Cohesiveness |

Tuckman and Schutz are widely known, especially in organizational and educational settings. Indeed, Schutz’s model is the basis for a standardized group leadership training program, and is particularly popular with defense forces. Kepner and especially Yalom are often cited by Gestalt therapy groups.

**Group Development Models and Culture**

I have stated earlier that I am doubtful of the applicability, or even relevance, of American/Anglo-Saxon group development models to a multicultural world. The next section deals with this issue, specifically from the perspective of models generally favored by Gestaltists.

I need to be explicit about my distinction between the relevance of these models to the cultures from which they emerged, and their wider applicability. It is clear to me that people from the culture of “I” actually need support and training in group membership, group leadership, and team-building.

This section necessarily will be somewhat compressed and highly generalized, and is not intended as anything other than an overview and general presentation of the connections among the themes of this short article.

Let me begin with a brief comparison among the proposals of Tuckman, Kepner, Schutz, and Yalom, respectively:

| Forming Storming Norming Performing Adjourning |
| Identity Influence Intimacy |
| Inclusion Control Affection |
| Orientation Conflict High Cohesiveness |
The similarities are striking, especially in phases 2 and 3, in which even the constructs are almost synonymous with each other.

From a cultural perspective, these can be interpreted as expressions of Individualistic, Low Context cultures. There is an opening phase in which the individuals meet, establish who’s who at a social level, sort out who’s in and who’s out, and get an individual sense of what’s going on. This is followed by a phase in which individuals jockey for position, becoming increasingly explicit (Low Context) in relation to each other, getting the pecking order straight, establishing informal leadership. If all goes well, and if there is the time, space, interest, freedom, and choice, then the individuals may become a self-defined group.

From a Familistic perspective, age, sibling position, gender, and family status will all play a part in the opening phase. It is as if the group members are establishing family relationships. As such, there may well be an early phase of some sibling rivalry with respect to leadership—generally between eldest brothers and/or eldest sisters, or family status in the culture concerned. Much of what goes on will be implicit (High Context) and, therefore, private. There is likely to be a strong “us/them” relationship to other groups—unless there are family relationships between groups. Thus, there are some similarities in terms of phases 1 and 2 above, though expressed differently in the internal dynamics of the group. A third phase in line with the above models is unlikely. My experience of such cultures is that groups tend to function in a distinct and semi-permanent variation of phase 2 as outlined above. Again, the linear, sequential models do not match, nor give meaning to, my experience.

From a Collectivistic perspective, almost nothing of the models applies, except perhaps that such groups are likely to begin with a “High Cohesiveness” phase, and maintain it. Identity is a given, as is Inclusion, and Orientation to group membership is a way of life. Influence and Control are also givens—the internal hierarchy is naturally established. Conflict is probably a breach of cultural norms. Terms such as Intimacy and Affection are also culturally inappropriate, both as constructs and as public behaviors.

Groups from a “Bounded Individualism” perspective are relatively easy to extrapolate from the above—and are too easily confused with “Individualism.” “Embedded Familism” is the most complex, combining as it does the “High Cohesiveness” of the Collective with the internal dynamics of a family structure. Again, the Western models presented above do not apply.

One further point: In Western contexts, the distinction between a group and a team is both clear and useful. In Collectivistic cultures, the distinction is not particularly relevant. Any “group” naturally becomes what Westerners would call a “team.” For example, staff of a Western company department might well be called a group. From this, some may be designated a team, and be expected to function differently than the group. In Japan for example, the department staff will naturally function as a team, maintaining this sense of themselves in both organizational and social settings.
Implications

As I sometimes say to my students, 1.3 billion Chinese can’t be wrong—a culture with a recognizable history of some 4,000 years and a Confucian social psychology since 600 BCE. With the re-emergence of the Eastern European cultures, increased access to and exchanges with Asian cultures and the Indian sub-continent, as well as the post-colonial tragedies in much of Africa and the Middle East, it is no longer possible to confine or even limit our understanding of groups and teams to the ethnocentric models of one region. We have a lot to learn from others—and an opportunity to use our existing knowledge and experience more appropriately than to simply add it to the colonial burden we impose on others. Living and working cross-culturally as I do, I have found that my Gestalt training, knowledge and experience have been invaluable supports both personally and professionally. What follows is what works for me. It may even work for other Gestalt practitioners, in whole or in part.

I began some years ago by working on observing to what extent Gestalt concepts could be used to parallel and replace the constructs of the standard group dynamic models. The main opportunity was with the Swedish and Danish Gestaltists who participated in my “3 X 3 day residential” on Group Processes. There is enough of a cultural difference between these geographic and linguistic neighbors also to give me the opportunity to explore the cross-cultural aspects of my model. Sweden can be regarded as Individualistic, with leanings towards Collectivism and High Context. Danes are more clearly Individualistic, and more Low Context: At the slightest opportunity, Danes are likely to propose the excitement of interpersonal encounters in a group setting, and regard most “work” as intrapersonal. Swedes, on the other hand, are known for their conflict avoidance (Daun 1989), typical of High Context cultures. As a result, while they value individual freedom (Individualism), it “should” be within the framework of social harmony (Collectivism).

Interestingly, the Tuckman synthesis mentioned earlier can take on a culturally specific form in Sweden. While working with an international MBA Class, 25 percent of whom were Swedes, I was fascinated to see the following, in one of the Project Team rooms with a Swede as informal leader:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TUCKMAN’S GROUP MODEL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forming</td>
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<td>Norming</td>
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<td>Performing</td>
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In another group, also with an influential Swede, Schutz’s FIRO had become:

| Belonging                |
| Finding your Role        |
| Togetherness             |

When I raised this issue in class, other Swedes thought that the Tuckman variation could better be expressed as:

| Forming                |
| Performing             |
| Done                  |
No matter what, “Storming” had disappeared! As had “Control!” This is fully congruent with Swedish cultural attitudes and behaviors.

At the same time, I was working with Gestalt groups in Ireland (Bounded Familism, High Context in a “family” setting, Low Context when functioning as individuals) as well as with groups in other cultural settings, as mentioned earlier.

My focus was on the contact modalities (Salonia, 1992), both internal to the group and between the group (as organism) and me (its environment), as well as between me (as organism) and the group (my environment). I began by pairing the contact modalities into possible polarities, or ends of a contact continuum. This gave the following, with simplified exemplifications:

- **Egotism** (being apart from) — **Confluence** (being a part of)
- **Introjecting** (open to influence) — **Deflecting** (closed to influence)
- **Projecting** (putting out) — **Retroflecting** (holding in)

On further reflection, and with the experience of working with the groups, I began to view the Egotism — Confluence continuum as the structured ground from which the other modalities emerged as supporting figures. Out of awareness, Deflecting and Projecting unattractive characteristics, as well as Retroflecting possible Projections of attractive characteristics can support a basic stance of Egotism; likewise, Introjecting and Retroflecting, as well as Projecting attractive characteristics, out of awareness, can support a basic stance of Confluence.

Also, there is enough of a match between Egotism and Individualism on the one hand, and Confluence with Familism/Collectivism on the other, for this particular continuum to be applicable cross-culturally. Members of a particular culture will intuitively pick their spot on the continuum as a group meets for the first time. For example, Individualist members are likely to move towards Egotism, with an openness to negotiated, strategic, and aware Confluence. There is likely to be a tendency towards a high level of Deflecting, both of each other as well as of the facilitator and, similarly, Projecting, whether silent, verbalized, or acted out.

A group from a Collectivist culture is likely to move naturally towards Confluence. This is easily supported by habitual Introjecting, both of each other and of the facilitator (if he/she is culturally congruent or aware), as well as Retroflecting in the service of group harmony.

A group from a Familistic culture will swing a little between the two until the internal relationships are settled, with all modalities in action from the start.

**Awareness**

What would Gestalt be without awareness? And it is one of Gestalt’s Eastern roots, so it straddles the cross-cultural bridge. There is, however, a cultural difference in self-awareness, and that which is raised by another type of awareness. Here, the whole issue of “face” comes into play, including the issue of how self-disclosure on a facilitator’s part can create difficulties for other-culture group members if it is culturally
inappropriate in their culture. In other words, as cross-cultural facilitators, we need a high level of sensitivity and, therefore, selectivity when intervening with any aspect of awareness about ourselves, or the group.

Our self-awareness—in the context of this article—can be about our culture. For example, as an Irishman, I come from a strongly Familistic culture, with equally strong tendencies towards Bounded Individualism. I am High Context in my extended family setting, polemically Low Context in my Bounded Individualism. As such, I understand, feel quite at home, and can function both socially and professionally in Israel, for example. Sweden—despite my 30 years of residence and fluent Swedish—is still a dilemma for me. I need to keep aware of such connections, and keep my sense of multiple realities alive and well at all times.

In terms of the Contact Modalities, I can swing between Egotism and Confluence, depending on the social context. When feeling secure (as in a family), I can Introject and Retroflect to maintain High Context harmony; otherwise and generally, I will Project and Deflect, keeping—as it were—my choice of the co-created contact-boundary fairly impermeable, influencing somewhat more than being open to influence, thus supporting my Egotism. Awareness helps me distinguish between what is what and who is who in my meetings with cultural environments other than my own.

In other words, a Gestalt-based, relatively culture-free model of group development and dynamics would have the Egotism – Confluence continuum as ground, with Deflecting – Introjecting, and Projecting – Retroflecting as the emerging figural continua of the interactive dynamics, both among group members, and between members – facilitator at all levels (individual, subgroup, group as a whole). In a culturally homogenous group, the ground will be structured around shared tendencies towards and acceptance of a position on the Egotism – Confluence continuum, expressed appropriately through the dynamics of the remaining contact modalities. In multicultural groups, sub-grouping is likely in terms of the structured ground, expressed again through choices (habitual or otherwise) of contact modality dynamics. As a facilitator, I need to be open to supporting these dynamics and raising awareness with respect to them, thus allowing the group the opportunity to change and, therefore, develop.

**Concluding Remarks**

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” to the extent that is possible for you in your integrity and cultural values. Be aware of how this affects you as a non-Roman, and sensitively and selectively raise the Romans’ awareness of their behavior patterns, thus allowing them an opportunity to change to whatever extent is culturally appropriate. The Gestalt contact modalities offer a cognitive and dynamic map for the facilitator, applicable across cultures. A group will change and develop as its awareness with respect to these modalities increases, both internally for its members, and externally to its environment, so that a wider range of modalities becomes available. At the same time, the perspective proposed here allows for culturally congruent change/development processes to emerge and be respected.

This is our work: to be fully present in our own fullness of person and culture,
and to selectively and sensitively share our awareness with our environmental other, respectful both of our own cultural context and that of the other, and the interactional dynamics at the contact boundary between us. As Gestalt practitioners—whatever our cultural background and values—we have a stance, an approach, a theory, and a methodology that can be applied, culturally congruent, and attuned, in cross-cultural and multicultural settings.

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REFERENCES

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