EDITORIAL: EXCITEMENT AND GROWTH IN GESTALT THERAPY RESEARCH

Alan Meara and Madeleine Fogarty

This issue of GJANZ is significant in two ways. The first is that this is the last issue of GJANZ to be automatically provided as an e-version to current members of GANZ as a professional association. If you wish to continue to receive the Journal you will need to become a member of the new GANZ, and the application procedures will be advised by GANZ in the near future.

The second is the special section devoted to Research, co-ordinated by Madeleine Fogarty, an increasingly respected member of the international research community, who sourced these contributions and comments on them below as guest editor. Her assistance with editing is greatly appreciated.

Publication of this section is timely, since as this edition goes to press the third International Gestalt Research Conference is taking place in Paris. Three world class psychotherapy researchers have been invited as keynote speakers and mentors: Louis Castonguay, Wolfgang Tschacher and Xavier Briffault. Most of the contributors to this journal edition will be there, along with scores of other Gestalt Therapy (GT) researchers, who are presenting their work. In the past two years Gestalt therapists have come a long way towards meeting the demands on the modern psychotherapeutic world for evidence, to demonstrate the efficacy of our modality, to connect with the wider psychotherapy community and support a deeper understanding of how GT works (Brownell, 2016).

As Jan Roubal observes in his article, GT research has entered adolescence, and with that comes a phase of adjustment to the energy of growth, and the need for a more cohesive foundation: “There is not one right way to support research in GT. There are different perspectives and strategies that offer competing arguments. The dynamics between different approaches can foster dialogue and so the development itself. The polarities within these dialogues are reflected in the current collection, and we aim to introduce readers to the burgeoning tradition of GT research and nourish the curiosity and research capacities inherent in GT practice, as well as providing “support for practice based research protocols for Gestalt Training Institutes with clinics.”(Grossman, this issue).

Roubal also notices the potential for a good fit between GT practice and
research. Our clinical practice is both phenomenological and systematic and we are constantly engaged with feedback and evaluation: “If we understand research as systematic curiosity, we can recognize ourselves as being very good at being curious about raising awareness and experimenting with new possibilities. What we need to develop further is the systematic part of research”. This is not a singular or pre-determined trajectory. He outlines the various methods that can be applied, and the need for co-ordination within the GT community to prepare for engagement with the wider psychotherapy research agenda.

However, developing models that are consistent with the GT phenomenological approach is sometimes perceived as being at odds with the positivistic frame of the scientific model (McConville, 2012). The polarity between a phenomenological approach and an empirical approach is being deconstructed (Roubal, this issue) yet a tension remains between, what Leslie Greenberg has termed, the politics and purity of research pursuits. The Problem-Treatment-Outcome (P-T-O) empirical model of evidence based practiced remains the “gold standard”, but many GT researchers continue to struggle with the objectifying paradigm of this model (Greenberg, 2016).

Mark Reck in a peer reviewed article argues that it is not only quantitative outcome research that suffers from the limits of this model, but also qualitative and mixed methods research as they tend to be founded on observable data. He introduces the work of Amedeo Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological method as an alternative to the observational framework of empiricism. This method assimilates phenomenological reports of the researchers experiences, into meaning units. These are “not pushed to the level of universality, but only to a level of generality that is appropriate for revealing psychological characteristics”. Reck suggests that this is a more gestalt-consilient and meaning-rich method of research.

Susan Grossman’s contribution to this edition, addresses the other side of the empiricism/phenomenology polarity and yet also seeks to integrate GT epistemology with tools for research. Grossman tackles the first part of the PTO model by outlining two GT coherent diagnostic instruments: the Gestalt Mental Status Exam (GMSE) and the Gestalt Inventory of Resistance Loadings (GIRL). These self-report surveys measure the Gestalt concept of contacting resistance styles. The GIRL been validated for use in quantitative investigations of whether there is a reduction (change in) the level of contacting resistances in clients over a course of Gestalt treatment. Grossman reports on the validation of the GSME, in a low-cost clinic in New York, the results of which honor quantitative efforts in GT research
and offer “clinicians in private practice a reliable instrument for diagnosing, measuring, and recording the progress of their clients”.

Jelena Zeleskov Doric offers an example of how the polarity between empirical research and phenomenological method can be deconstructed through understanding the research process as acknowledging what is, not what is said to be or what should be. Doric reports on a research project conducted in a high security male prison in Serbia. The participants attended a weekly gestalt therapy group, and Doric’s report focuses on an extract of writings and reflections from an offender during a post-treatment interview. Doric’s approach aligns with Janesick (2015) who underscores the axiom of impermanence in the research process, since “the phenomena we observe are always changing.” This is a key feature of the qualitative research process particularly when conducting interviews. Doric inventively connects the complexity of the research process to principles from Zen Buddhism.

Herrera himself offers a personal journey through the emergence of GT in Chile and arrives at the current situation, which he uses facebook terms to describe: it’s complicated! On one hand there are several GT institutes with many students and GT is taught in the psychology department at the University of Santiago. On the other hand GT remains widely misunderstood in the psychology field, and most GT students are disinclined to complete dissertations and engage in research. Herrera likens the situation of GT in Chile to Asterix’s village in Roman occupied France: “It’s alive and healthy, with movement inside, but quite isolated, gradually losing ground and subject to a lot of prejudice / ill will from outsiders”. Herrera emphasizes the need for GT research to remedy this scenario, and helpfully he offers a constructive program for participation: Know how, shared vision and people power.

He also describes three major GT research projects that are based in Chile. The first is the development of a PTO instrument that is consistent with the way GT is practiced in Chile. This instrument focuses on polarities and the development of polarities. The polarization integration process is described in the book Towards a Research Tradition in Gestalt Therapy, which is reviewed in this edition of GJANZ. The second project seeks to find empirical evidence for an endemic body dialogue method and to test the proposed theoretical change mechanisms. The third project is an international collaborative project to study process and outcome in Gestalt Therapy: the single case experimental design and time-series analysis (SCTS). An international team is forming a wide practice based research network (PBRN) of colleagues that can use this methodology in their private
practices and institutions.

Paddy O’Regan provides a commentary on Herrera’s article. O’Regan focuses on the differences in GT training in Australia and NZ, where the influences have been dominated by the US and UK and therefore do not share the Chilean emphasis on polarities. O’Regan notes that more locally the broad theoretical influences of GT emphasise the situational, relational and embodied approaches. O’Regan resonates with Herras discussion of the diminished regard for GT in Chile, which parallels the situation in Australia. “The implications of this situation in Australia is evidenced in policy documents such as the Focused Psychological Strategies acceptable for the Medicare rebate, which emphasises behavioural and cognitive modalities. This situation has created a pressure for a response from Gestalt practitioners and Herrera’s challenge for Gestalt practitioners to be involved in empirical research to care for this modality is beginning to be met locally and internationally”. O’Regan’s concerns that meeting the research challenge is problematic because the positivist foundation of EBP potentially undermine the epistemological foundations of GT, brings the collection in this edition of GJANZ full circle. O’Regan is not alone amongst GT practitioners in perceiving a normative agenda of “shoulds” in EPB.

Phil Brownell offers support for Pablo Herrera Salinas’ work, noting that the article will be included in his second edition of the Handbook for Theory, Research, and Practice in Gestalt Therapy, and lists other contributors to this edition for the information of readers.

How will this dilemma be resolved and how will we emerge from our adolescent phase of research growth? As phenomenologists, we will sit with our situation and deepen our understanding of it. This is happening at Conferences around the world, in Paris at present and recently in Catania, Sicily, where 800 GT practitioners gathered for a conference on the relationships between the epistemology of clinical practice and research. Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb offers a brief summary of the conference.

This dilemma is reflected Peter Young’s review of Towards a Research Tradition in Gestalt Therapy, an edited collection that aims to advance the research tradition in Gestalt therapy, as the book’s editors see this as integral to the advancement of Gestalt therapy. He notes that some in the Gestalt community will intuitively accept the logic of this argument, others may harbour misgivings about the perceived inherent incompatibility between the scientific method on the one hand, and the Gestalt therapeutic process on the other. This text acknowledges and explores these concerns, and it seeks to engage this group of research agnostics and atheists in dialogue.
Peter draws on his Social Work professional background which uses the language of evidence *informed* rather than evidence based practice as a counter to this movement towards reductionism and positivism. Perhaps this orientation might help encourage dialogue within the broad church of Gestalt therapy.

We invite you to explore what engages your interest in the articles presented here, particularly around considering ways to contribute to the expansion of GT research in one or more of the various paths that have been presented.

Other contributions in this issue include Kimberley Lipschus’s informative examination of reproductive challenges experienced by women over their lifespan. This is framed against a description of an Inuit myth – the skeleton woman, woven into attachment theory and the paradoxical theory of change applied in practice. The piece is written in the style of investigative journalism, quoting many sources which, including not the usual academic resources, but that could perhaps be considered another form of research.

The “In dialogue” offering is a departure from the usual interview format, instead being an invited conversation between two well respected Gestalt ‘elders’ Zish Ziembinski and Brenda Levien, located at the most distant geographical ends of our territory. They share stories and the experiences of how they discovered Gestalt, their training, being part of the founding of GANZ and their interests at present.

Sadly, there are two ‘In Memorium’ tributes: one for Anna Bernet, written by two of her previous students and mentorees. Anna will be remembered in particular by those who took part in the early years of formalising Gestalt training, and the founding of GANZ; and one for David Geldard, a Brisbane based practitioner who was published widely in counselling and psychotherapy practice.

The commitment by GANZ to the continuing publication of the Journal in these transitional times is very welcome, and as always, invitations to submit your writings and contribute to the Gestalt evolution in theory and practice are encouraged.
References


Biographies

**Madeleine Fogarty** has been in private practice as a Gestalt therapist for over 17 years. She works with individuals, couples and groups in Melbourne and also offers supervision. Madeleine is a clinical member of PAFCA, AAGT, the treasurer for GANZ and a scientific board member of the EAGT. Madeleine is writing a PhD in Psychology at Swinburne University on the development of a Fidelity Scale for Gestalt therapy (GTFS).

mfogarty@swin.edu.au or madeleine@madeleinefogarty.com

**Alan Meara B.Com. (Hons), M. Gest Therapy, FM GANZ** is a Gestalt therapist and clinical supervisor, and has worked as a Gestalt trainer in various locations in Australia and Europe for 20 years. He has a background in Organisation Development and participative group work. He has a deep interest in the potential for complexity theory and critical realism to add to our understanding of field theory and phenomenology. Apart from his own writing projects he is supportive of assisting others to contribute to the expanding collection of written works on Gestalt theory and practice.

ozgjeditor@ganz.org.au or alanmeara@optusnet.com.au