Getting really serious (and excited) about Research: report from Taormina

Madeleine Fogarty

During the inaugural joint conference of the European Association of Gestalt Therapy (EAGT) and the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT) held at Taormina, Sicily in September 2016, I found myself sitting at a round table overlooking the Mediterranean enjoying delicious Sicilian food and engaged in intense conversation. Those around the table included Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb (Italy), Les Greenberg (Canada), Phil Brownell (USA), Jan Roubal (Czech republic), Mark Reck (USA), Gianni Francesetti (Italy), Vincent Beja (France), IlliaMstibovskyi (Russia), Pablo Herrera Salinas (Chile) and Joe Melnick (USA).

The discussion was focused on the intention to form a group of Gestalt researchers within the Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR). According to their website, the SPR is a “powerhouse of psychotherapy research that encourages the exchange of new ideas in a friendly and supportive environment”. The fact that over 20 Gestalt researchers are either currently members of the SPR (or about to be), is an indication of the rapid growth and energy that surrounds current research practice in Gestalt therapy (GT); and it further indicates that we are ready to be included as serious researchers in the wider world of psychotherapy. Next year, two books on Gestalt research will be published: Handbook for Theory, Research, and Practice in Gestalt Therapy (Brownell, second edition, in press) and Towards a Research Tradition in Gestalt Therapy (Roubal, in press).

The conference at Taormina included many research presentations in addition to the key-note plenary by Les Greenberg and a dozen wonderful poster presentations short-listed for the young researcher award.

Les Greenberg’s plenary: Politics and Purity

Greenberg’s plenary was attended by most of the 1000 delegates to the conference. The theme of Greenberg’s presentation was politics and purity, in which he argued that the tendency to lean towards a tradition of theoretical complexity and purity of method was leaving GT behind in Evidence Based Practice (EBP). Greenberg sympathized with an historical
view that research was perceived as incompatible with GT; that it was
dehumanizing; and that its relevance to clinical practice was questionable
(Greenberg, 1997). He acknowledged that these views had plagued him in
his early research career and that they had become obstacles that had led
some people to become afraid or contemptuous of research (McConville,
2014). But Greenberg urged us to find a way to work between the polarities
of aesthetics and scientific measurement. He shared that in turning towards
the possibilities of a more pragmatic approach he had discovered that
research was not only a good idea for achieving funding, recognition
and support for psychotherapy but also for understanding the process of
psychotherapy itself and for really grasping what is involved in clinical
practice.

Existing Gestalt research
Of course, a great deal of Gestalt research has already been conducted.
In a recent publication Phil Brownell reviews a large body of Gestalt
research including Gestalt hybrid research (a form of mixed method),
Gestalt consilient research, and trends in the developing Gestalt research
tradition (Brownell, 2016). While some of this includes research that is
focused on the practice of Gestalt therapy and on approaches that utilize
Gestalt techniques but remain something other than Gestalt therapy, much
of the research reviewed by Brownell is more accurately described as
supportive of GT, rather than established as GT. Greenberg suggested that
if GT is really going to take up a place in EBP, we need a more political
focus, and must be prepared to address the demands of a medical model
(Frew, 2013). He admitted that the prospect of this had been daunting when
he began his foray into EBP for Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT); but
that initial hesitation gave way to a whole new world of possibilities, and
significantly advanced the conceptual and practical application of clinical
EFT (Greenberg, 2011).

Greenberg encouraged publications in Gestalt journals and also in
psychotherapy research and high impact factor journals. He also supported
us to present not only at Gestalt conferences but also at conferences
organized by the Society for Exploration of Psychotherapy Integration
(SEPI) and SPR.

Greenberg cited the Gestalt Therapy Fidelity Scale (GTFS) as a
foundation stone for EBP in GT. The fidelity scale provides a means of
determining whether GT has been conducted. Without this, claims for
the efficacy of GT cannot be proven, and therefore will not be published
in journals outside of GT associations (Fogarty, Bhar, Theiler & O’Shea,
The GTFS is a short 20-item scale that was developed through an international Delphi study (Fogarty, Bhar, Theiler & O’Shea, 2016). A focus group conducted in Melbourne in July 2016 indicated that the scale is effective in determining the differences between GT and Schema Therapy. An international validation of the GTFS will be conducted early next year. After that, the scale will be available for use in EBP research. This will also enable research that has been conducted as a GT hybrid to be claimed post hoc for GT, as long as there are video examples of the clinical work that formed the basis of the research.

Greenberg also suggested that to become a true applied science psychotherapy research needs to provide evidence of efficacy and also to specify the processes of change that lead to the effects. For the past three years several researchers have been engaged in this practice through the development of a Single Case Time Series (SCTS) model. This project started in 2013 as an international collaborative effort to do empirical research on Gestalt therapy effectiveness and change processes. Facing a reality in which there is enormous external pressure for doing research (as well as intrinsic scientific curiosity), and that few Gestalt colleagues who work in universities have research experience or access to funding, Pablo Herrera Salinas and his team selected the Single Case Experimental Design methodology, with Time Series Analysis. This design is optimal because: (1) It is not very time consuming, making it relatively easy to implement for a private practitioner with a client; (2) If we can have four case studies using this method, with patients with a specific diagnosis, Gestalt therapy can be declared “possibly efficacious” for those kind of patients (for example, people with depression); and if we can have 10 case studies, Gestalt can be declared “efficacious”; (3) It allows us to gather important and detailed information about the change process, not only the final result of the psychotherapy. Currently, in 2016, Herrera Salinas and his team have 20 cases collected in Chile (in Spanish) and are in the process of finishing an English version of the manual and didactic material to invite colleagues from other nationalities and languages to participate in the research. This research provides a bridge between a qualitative case study approach and quantitative statistical data that can be gathered in the change processes of clinical practice.

Willi Butollo presented the findings from a randomized controlled clinical trial comparing Dialogical Exposure Therapy and Cognitive Processing Therapy for adult outpatients suffering from PTSD after Type I Trauma in adulthood (Butollo et al, 2016). This project took many years to complete and Butollo stressed the importance of team-work, organization
and funding in establishing a research tradition for GT. Butollo and his colleagues found that patients receiving both types of therapy achieved significant and large reductions in PTSD symptoms. The only significant difference between the groups was at post-treatment where Cognitive Processing Therapy patients had lower self report symptom scores. At the follow-up, between-group effect sizes were generally very small.

Another exciting project presented at Taormina was by Susan Grossman, whose work utilizes the Gestalt Inventory of Resistance Loadings (GIRL), a 100 item personality questionnaire developed by Dr. Ansel Woldt, Dr. Kevin Prosnick, and Mary Plank at Kent State University, and the Gestalt Mental Status Exam (GMSE), a 123-item questionnaire developed to explicate behavioral descriptors for each of the contacting resistance styles (Woldt, Prosnick, & Kepner, 2013). Grossman’s research investigates the correlation between and among DSM-5 diagnoses, contacting styles and changes in contacting styles over the course of treatment and of Gestalt therapy training. This is the first trial using these instruments to investigate the above relationships with a clinic/client treatment population.

**Practice based research**

The above projects represent the EBP end of GT research; and there is also a lot of activity around practice-based research (Barber, 2009). In the Czech Republic, Jan Roubaland his team are working on a practitioner friendly way to get research based feedback from the client. They are developing a GT version of the measurement of Change after Psychotherapy (CHAP, Sandell, 1997). In 2011 in the UK, 135 Gestalt psychotherapists participated in the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation project (Stevens et al, 2011). The findings of this research indicate that GT is as effective as other modalities. Once the GTFS has been added to this project, the effectiveness of GT can be demonstrated.

Christine Stevens also presented on her innovative supervision research which is described in the new book on research that she has edited with Steve Goss: Making Research Matter. Part 1 of the book explores the rigorous and reflexive enquiry skills needed to sustain research project work. Part 2 presents nine work based psychotherapy research projects that were part of the Doctorate in Psychotherapy (DPsych) by Professional Studies at Metanoia in London.

Mark Reck gave a detailed presentation on the empiricist framework as the philosophy of science in psychological research (including limitations). This then extended to a discussion about the broadening of psychological
research to consider multiple philosophies of science (especially as prompted by the specific questions being asked in research). His paper offered a presentation of a qualitative research design that emphasizes a phenomenological philosophy of science, namely Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009).

The poster presentations were inspiring in their scope and content: They included a research project on resilience from the post 2015 earthquake in Kathmandu, a project on early dialogue in the field of motherhood, a research project on the professional and training conditions of Austrian integrative Gestalt therapists in the context of sense of coherence and burnout, and a project on the development of self function and learning disabilities in childhood and early adolescence. The research award was given to Dr. Vikram Kollmannskog, from the Norwegian Gestalt Institute for his work on Gestalt approaches to gender identity issues.

**Mentorship and the 2017 Paris research conference**

One of the major supports for research is mentorship. Greenberg acknowledged that he would not have progressed as a researcher without the mentorship of Laura Rice, a process researcher and student of Carl Rogers, who encouraged Greenberg to become a pragmatist and develop a research program for EFT. The Gestalt community is encouraging all who may be interested to attend the first joint research conference of the EAGT and AAGT in Paris in May 2017. This conference extends the tradition of Gestalt research conferences that were initiated by Joe Melnick and Phil Brownell in 2013. These conferences seek to mentor GT research by providing face to face support from internationally renowned researchers. Scott Churchill, Les Greenberg, Jon Frew and Ansel Woldt are some of the researchers who have previously presented at this biannual eventand have gone on to mentor GT research and promote publications.

Next year in Paris, the international presenters include Louis Castonguay, Professor at the Department of Psychology at Pennsylvania State University, USA; Wolfgang Tschacher, Professor at the Department of Psychotherapy, University Hospital of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Bern, Switzerland; and Xavier Briffault, who is a Researcher in social sciences and mental health epistemology at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, France. This conference tradition has nourished researchers in presenting their work in long workshop forums where they can then garner on-going research support from the presenters. There are funds to support attendees available through the AAGT.
Research section in GJANZ
In the next edition of GANZ we are inviting researchers from this conference and from Australia and New Zealand to offer their research for a special research section of the journal. These pieces might include literature reviews (which are the first step in any research project), case studies, SCTS projects or articles on how the common factors approach interfaces with GT specific research. We welcome all who may be interested in contributing to the research section to contact Madeleine Fogarty for writing support.

References


Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR). http://www.psychotherapyresearch.org


**Biography**

**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). If you are interested in participating in the international validation of the GTFS, or in contributing to the special section on research in GJANZ, please contact her.

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