Figure and ground

Many fine examples of the concept of figure and ground have been illustrated visually through diagrammatic examples (see below). However, I urge the reader to bear in mind that in gestalt figure and ground is used to describe any process of experiencing.

So what is this concept of figure and ground? Picture yourself watching a fascinating film at the cinema. The image that you gaze upon on the screen is the figure whilst the ground is everything that surrounds that image; the less prominent images on the screen, the screen, the cinema itself, the person sitting beside you, your journey to the cinema, what happened to you earlier in the day, your life outside, your relationships, the whole of your history, your cultural background. All of this forms the ground of your experience from which you create your figure from the image on the screen. Your ground will profoundly affect how you form that figure. As the film unfolds a couple on the screen embrace and kiss. Your fascination in the film may subside as sadness surfaces as a new figure emerges from your ground of a past relationship, or this may trigger thoughts that there is too much gratuitous sex on view nowadays with this reaction stemming from the ground of your parents’ prudish attitudes.

This key gestalt therapy concept was first discussed and illustrated by the predecessors of gestalt therapy, the gestalt psychologists (Wertheimer, 1925; Koffka, 1935). The concept has often been illustrated by the depiction of a vase and two face profiles (Figure 1.1) known as the Rubin vase although many such illustrations are available. Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 show the relationship between figure and ground. One image cannot exist without the other and in all three examples only one image can be figural at any moment whilst the other forms the ground.

The process of figure formation is of interest to gestalt therapists in terms of what figure the individual selects and how it is chosen. In other words how does this person make sense of their world at this moment in time (and then the next moment and then...
Figure 1.2 Columns or figures?

The next moment? The figure emerges from an undifferentiated background of experience out of which focused needs and interests surface. In a healthy process of figure formation these needs and interests will emerge with clarity and sharpness, stimulating energy. It will ponse to char tion becomes rather than th or closed. Cx experience.

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energy. It will be a fluid process that will be updated in response to changing situations. When the process of figure formation becomes rigid or habitual, relating to a past environment rather than the here and now, awareness of the novel is diminished or closed. Consequently, the person does not integrate the new experience.

In relating to our environment, competing needs rise and fall originating from either an internal experience or external stimuli. As you read this book other figures will emerge as different needs/interests surface. A need for a drink may become figural from your ground, something you read may touch a memory, a seemingly random need such as a wish to contact a friend may surface, you may become bored, the washing machine cycle may be completed, the door bell may ring and so on.

In certain states, such as acute anxiety, figure formation is rapid and poorly differentiated from the ground from which it emerges. Assimilation of the experience does not take place. One blurred figure follows another as flitting attention leads to a chattering of incomplete gestalts. Contact with the environment is diminished – breathing becomes shallow and rapid, negative thoughts and projected fantasies race, the whole bodily system speeds up. The person’s failure to form clearly differentiated
figures leads to them responding primarily from an internal pole, increasing their sense of isolation. Conversely, in a healthy process the emerging figure will be the dominant need at that moment and will be well defined, standing out from the background, what is referred to as good form. We could think of the difference as watching television with a damaged aerial and watching a television in high definition.

The here and now

In gestalt therapy, this is called the here and now. This is the immediate experience of the client's moment and situation. The client is in the moment, with the therapist, present, fully engaged.

Gestalt's criticism of behaviorism and in particular the idea of the here and now is that it is an incomplete picture. The therapist is not just reacting to the client's experience but is also providing a model of the situation. It is a collaborative process, with the therapist and client working together to understand what is happening in the moment.

This process is selective, as the therapist can help the client to focus on what is important in the moment. This can provide a sense of agency and control, as the client can reflect on what is happening and think about what they might do next.

In a wider field, these struggles to encounter the world, all may mirror...