The need organizes the field

A hiker has been on a challenging walk acutely aware of his empty water bottle, a constant reminder of his thirst. He happens upon a rushing freshwater river and with relief gulps down some of the fast-flowing water. On the opposite bank a fisherman is casting his fly and watching the river intently for the possible bite of a salmon. An ecologist is measuring the depth and flow of the river to assess whether the water level has dropped and the feasibility of harnessing its energy, whilst a canoeist rushes by on those same currents. Two young children splash playfully in the shallows of the riverbank, watched by their mother grateful for a few minutes respite from their energetic demands. The same river perceived in radically different ways according to the person’s needs.

Lewin (1938) considered that we create a map of our landscape based upon our need at that moment in time. He gave an example, similar to the one above, of a soldier in wartime and a farmer in peacetime viewing the same field of corn based on their needs. People are always actively organizing their fields. They do so in relation to their current needs which will be influenced by past experience. For example, our hiker may have had an experience of poisoning from drinking from a river and choose to remain thirsty, or the mother may not allow herself to enjoy the experience of space from her children through an introjected belief that this would be neglectful and make her a bad mother.

Self-awareness is often spoken of as an internal event disconnected from others. In gestalt self-awareness is a field event – strictly speaking it is self-as-process-awareness. Any of the individuals in my given example, if self-aware, would be aware of the figural aspects of their phenomenal field impacting upon their functioning in the here and now. Their behaviour will be influenced by their past and their anticipated future, but it will be the present dynamics of the current field (of which past and future are a part) in which the figural need surfaces that will influence the behaviour and organize the field.
When we meet with clients we need to gain an understanding of how they organize their field and what is causing them to constellate their field in this way.

**Case example**

A client has been a victim of a road traffic accident in which a white transit van ran into the side of him. His children were in the car at the time and he could do nothing to avoid the collision. Since the accident he has become oversensitized to possible dangers on the roads due to an overwhelming need to ensure his family and he himself remain safe. In response to his need for safety he is constantly anxious and alert to any possible dangers. He is hyper-vigilant when he sees any white transit van, which triggers particularly strong memories of his accident. He begins to recall past events where his safety was threatened, resulting in a greater need for certainty and security, exacerbated by his projecting into the future about what dangers could befall his children. He attempts to minimize uncertainty by avoiding driving at busy times or on busy roads before withdrawing from driving completely. He continues to organize his field around his need for safety, security and certainty through avoidance.

As we say in gestalt, one thing leads to another. A need organizes the field, the field talks back and a new need forms and so the process continues. The only certainty we have is that there will be constant change. Although the need organizes the field and we need an understanding of the person’s need, it would be a mistake to attempt to study that need in isolation. Many links have been made between findings in quantum physics that show that we cannot study one specific thing in isolation (Philippsen, 2009), as there is no specific isolated thing in existence. There are only interrelated fields of energy and these principles support gestalt’s field perspective.

**Investigating self**

Lewin’s field (or self) at a certain time is not necessarily the same field as at another time. At a micro level we feel supported at home, at work, and at other significant places, but at a macro level we feel supported at school, work, and at other significant sites.

**Experiential exercise**

Draw a map of your interpersonal, home, and any other supportive or unsupportive circumstances at a personal, family, and community level, and see if you can become a physical, nurturing, and inspiring environment in which you can thrive.

As therapist, in order to be a better therapist, we will be better therapists if we understand the principles and practice of gestalt therapy.