

14

The gestalt cycle of experience: later developments

Different phased maps and diagrammatic representations describing the phases of a gestalt have been constructed since Perls (1947) and PHG (1951) first described their ideas regarding a contact cycle. Two major contributions referred to widely are the Awareness–Excitement–Contact Cycle (Zinker, 1977: 97) and The Cycle of Gestalt Formation and Destruction (Clarkson, 1989: 29). Figures 1.4 and 1.5 are variations on these constructs.

In Table 1.1 I have given two examples of very different experiences and described them in terms of the phases of a gestalt cycle as illustrated above. One is an example of a need of thirst being satisfied, the other a conceptualization of a grieving process.

The examples in Table 1.1 and Figures 1.4 and 1.5 can give the impression that a cycle of experience describes the meeting of *either* a physical need (thirst) or a psychological process (bereavement). From a gestalt perspective the physical and the psychological cannot be separated. If I am thirsty there are psychological effects and if I am grieving there are physical reactions. There are completed cycles within incomplete cycles and this is most obviously evident in the longer gestalt cycles in our lives. For

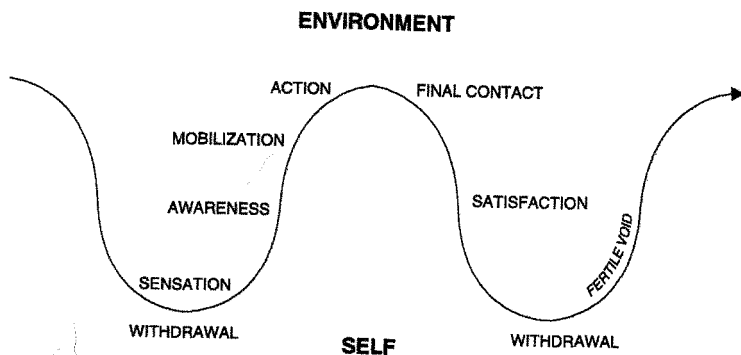


Figure 1.4 Zinker's Awareness–Excitement–Contact Cycle

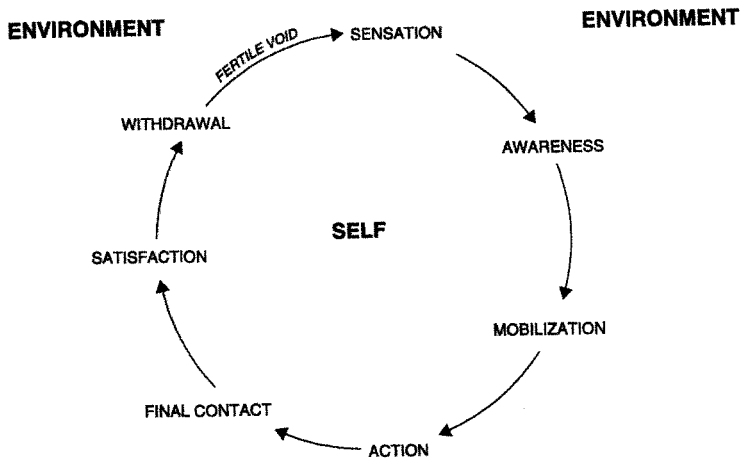


Figure 1.5 Clarkson's Cycle of Gestalt Formation and Destruction

instance, during a grieving process there will be certain resolutions reached within the process. Following my father's death my mother completed a gestalt cycle in her struggle to discard my father's clothes within an overarching gestalt cycle of a bereavement process that after fifty-two years of marriage will have many such grieving tasks (gestalt cycles).

A criticism levelled at the gestalt cycle is that use of such a map perpetuates and encourages an individualistic view of the person, and does not adequately address the impact of the environmental situation of which the person is a part. It begins with the emergence of an urge or drive in the individual and implies that first there is a subject and then an environment followed by an interaction between the two. In doing so it implies that the individual is superior to the situation (Wollants, 2008).

When using any maps or constructs in gestalt therapy we need to hold them lightly. They can be useful ways of conceptualizing experience, but they are only maps and the map is not the territory. All the influences pressing in upon the situation cannot be conveyed through any of the examples of cycles of experience discussed over these last two points.

In closing this point I would like to invite the reader to consider how their cultural background may affect their journey through

Table 1.1 Point 14: Gestalt Cycle, later developments

	<i>Thirst</i>	<i>Bereavement</i>
Sensation	Dryness of mouth/ throat emerges.	Numbness and shock response.
Awareness	Sensation is interpreted and need for water moves into awareness.	Reality of the enormity of the loss begins to surface with associated emotional responses.
Mobilization	Person moves to satisfy the emerging need, e.g. begins to mobilize self to get up to move towards a tap.	Begins to contact emotions in reaction to the loss – for example sadness/tears.
Action	Moves towards the tap, turns on tap, fills glass, lifts glass to mouth.	Moves towards expressing the emotion, e.g. eyes begin to prick, breathing deepens, lips quiver.
Final contact	Drinks the water from the glass.	Emotion is expressed fully. Cries, feels the hurt of the loss.
Satisfaction	Thirst is quenched.	Organism feels the force of the emotion expressed with associated response, e.g. relief, hopelessness.
Withdrawal	Moves away from the activity, the need having been met.	Organism withdraws from the emotion.
Void	Leaves space for further need to emerge.	Space is left for the next need to emerge in the grieving process.

the gestalt cycle. Having lived my life in Britain as a white male from a 'working class' Catholic upbringing with a strong work ethic, I experience cultural pressure to move on to the next task. Consequently, I can easily rush the satisfaction and withdrawal phases and struggle to leave space for the void. In my experience this is a common pattern with people from my culture.