The Unified Field in Practice

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This paper reflects on the "unified field" as a concept at the heart of Gestalt theory and practice. The field perspective is contrasted with a dualistic outlook that separates individuals from human systems. Instead, individuals can be regarded as embodying systems, both affected by them and affecting how they are. Implications for practice, for ideas of adult development, and for dealing with political and social issues are all discussed. The paper concludes by underlining the sociopolitical priorities of the founders of the Gestalt approach.

At Gestalt practitioners, we never really work with "just an individual" because human beings always exist within systems of relationship. They identify with families, communities, occupational groups, and nationalities. Such affiliations, roots, and historical continuities serve as important human stabilizers and contribute significantly to a sense of identity. Lives and collective systems intertwine and within the Gestalt discipline, for this web of interconnection between the individual and the communal.

This article demonstrates how the concepts and wider perspectives associated with field theory (i.e., the descriptions and concepts surrounding the central idea of the unified field) can better inform Gestalt practice. In turn, it draws upon practical experience as a way of deepening understanding of field theory. The paper is intended as a series of linked reflections on a fundamental, yet elusive, concept within Gestalt thought. It is not—and makes no pretence of being—a compre-

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Parts of this article were included in a lecture entitled "We Create Our Systems, Our Systems Create Us," given at the Austrian Gestalt Therapy Conference held in Vienna in 1993, and published in 1994 in Fritz Perls, Facultas-Universitäts Verlag, Ges.m.b.H., Vienna, Austria.

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The Concept of the Unified Field in Gestalt Therapy

Field theory derives from the work of Kurt Lewin (1890–1947). In psychology, it is the body of ideas and way of thinking built around the concept of the unified field. Lewin's influence on early Gestalt therapy thinking has been underestimated (Parlett, 1993). It was indirect in that he died 4 years before the publication of Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality. However, his ideas were widely known and popular at the time of its writing. As a student and one-time colleague of Wertheimer and Kohler, Lewin was regarded as a member of the Gestalt school of psychology. His impact on social psychology, organization development, action research, group dynamics, and sensitivity training had a "breathtaking sweep" (Marrow, 1969). His concern with practical and social issues was grounded in his field theory thinking (Lewin, 1952). His famous quotation, that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory," might be a confident reference to field theory and its usefulness.

Lewin was not the first Gestaltist to theorize about the field. Earlier ideas were present in the writings of Wertheimer, Kohler, and Koffka. Yet his thinking went far beyond. His concern was to establish how the behavior of an object (including a person) is "determined by the field structure or... configuration of the energy within the field" (Hartmann, 1935, p. 68). In Lewin's field (Lewin, 1952) there was a spatial representa-
tion of a person’s psychological reality. Drawing on topology and vector geometry, he attempted to show, for example, how someone’s desire or want for something might be countered by “obstacles” that existed either in the “person’s environment” or in the person’s “beliefs and attitudes” and that behavior—what the person actually did—was a function of all of these sets of “forces” relative to one another, and all interacting together. So “inner” and “outer” reality are both contained within the field, as are other distinctions—such as “person” and “situation,” and “figure” and “ground.” The field is a unifying concept, not eliminating such divisions, but denoting them as provisional and relativistic. The differentiations have only a temporary phenomenological status, not an absolute, fixed, or “objective” status.

Among other Gestalt therapy ancestors, Smuts (1926), also thought in terms of the field. He wrote: “One of the most salutary reforms in thought which could be effected would be for people to accustom themselves to the idea of fields, and to look upon every concrete thing or person or even abstract idea as merely a centre, surrounded by zones or aurars or spheres of the same nature as the centre, only more attenuated and shading off into indefiniteness” (pp. 18–19). Here the idea of the field seems more literal somehow, yet it is an attempt again at inviting us into a way of thinking which is relational. As Smuts says elsewhere, “a thing does not come to a stop at its boundaries or bounding surfaces… it passes beyond its bounds, and its surrounding ‘field’ is therefore essential… to its correct appreciation as a thing… and the ways in which (things) affect each other” (pp. 327–328).

In present-day Gestalt writing, there is even more emphasis being given to field theory. Both Yontef (1993) and Resnick (1995) have suggested that field theory is one of the three legs on which Gestalt therapy stands as a distinctive approach (phenomenology and dialogue being the other two legs). Other writers on field theory (e.g., Latner, 1983; Parlett, 1991; Wheeler, 1991; Beaumont, 1993) have identified it as crucial to their understanding of Gestalt philosophy and method. With each reformulation, the richness of the ideas becomes more apparent.

Writers about field theory in the human sciences acknowledge that the notion of “the field” derives from physics. There it has appeared from the eighteenth century as a concept to help elucidate “action at a distance.” Physicists agree that there is a gravitational field, an electromagnetic field (remember your grade school science experiment with the iron filings on paper, “organized” by a magnet?), and strong and weak nuclear fields (Laszlo, 1993). Lewin’s (1952) development of the field concept as a “human force field” was a bold step, taking it beyond the realm of physics.

In summary, field theory invites the Gestalt practitioner into nonlinear thinking (undermining simplistic notions of cause and effect). It honors the specific nature of situations and people (no individual’s experience field is the same as another’s). It is relativistic and nondichotomous (instead fields interconnect, overlap, and co-influence one another). It underlines present-centeredness and the uniqueness of moment (requiring a process orientation that acknowledges a world of flux and change). Above all the field is organized (meaning arises out of the constellation of all the energies, vectors, or influences in the field as the act together). These ideas are discussed in more detail in an earlier paper (Parlett, 1991) and by Yontef (1984). (Other principles, e.g., applying field theory to contact, as a “mutually creative interaction” between two people—where “each participates in the creation of the other”—are to be found in Beaumont [1993].)

One of the confusions that arise for newcomers to field theory relate to what “the field” actually is. Is it simply a metaphor or analogy, or is there an imputation of some actual “energy field”? In the author’s view, the status of the concept is generally metaphorical. However, extraordinary developments are occurring in modern physics and increasingly in “trans-disciplinary” research between physicists and neuroscientists. Talk is of a possible unifying field that encompasses both mind and matter; of an unidentified fifth kind of energy field (in addition to the four already recognized in physics); and—significantly—of direct communication between human minds without mediation of the senses (e.g., as in telepathy), via an energy field so subtle that the human brain, as the most sensitive measuring instrument in the known universe, alone can pick it up (Laszlo, 1993). The ideas are awesome and revolutionary. The phenomena (of, for instance, parallel brain-wave patterns at a distance between lovers—see Targ and Harary, 1984) are now regarded as necessary to explain rather than to explain away. That human beings are profoundly interconnected emerges more and more from scientific discoveries. (Perhaps this should read “rediscoveries” in that a number of indigenous cultures—e.g., in Australia—“knew” and took for granted such connections among humans and between humans and nature.) What emerges overall is that the individualist paradigm, as Wheeler (1995) calls it—with its assumption that human beings are wholly separate beings ending at their skins—is in retreat. Whatever its exact status, the unified field is a concept that is here to stay.

Appreciating the Unified Field

Field theory, Lewin used to emphasize, is more than a theory in the conventional sense. It gives us a holistic way of regarding human experience. The perspective is critical to our becoming competent and sensitive practitioners. “Seeing” nondichotomously is a first and necessary step.
For instance, breathing and the presence of air are so interlinked that to separate them is an academic abstraction; yet few people recognize this. The same goes for eating in relation to food or driving in relation to roads and gas stations. Neither pole exists without its companion. People can only be "therapy clients" because therapy and therapists also exist.

If one is to move on from the customary dualism and splitting, a unified field perspective needs to be cultivated. Another example has been found helpful in getting the point across. It has to do with trees. These can be thought of as distinct and separate organisms, indeed as large individual plants. Yet in studying their life (and with concern for their well-being), there is a progressive realization of how completely trees are integrated within the ecosystem of which they form part. A tree forms part of a landscape—affected by other vegetation, predators, soil chemistry—and provides shelter and nourishment for other plant and animal life. If one uproots a tree, the landscape is changed, the ecosystem disrupted. Unless replanted, the tree dies—still undergoing further transformation as part of a wider system, natural or artificial. In other words, the tree does not exist independently. The only tree that can do that—i.e., exist as a landscape-independent tree—is a conceptual tree, imaginary or theoretical, a Platonic ideal.

Of course, even a hypothetical committed dualist would acknowledge that there is "connection" between a tree and its environment. He or she would speak in terms of the tree being separate from its environment and connected to it. Adopting the field perspective more thoroughly would involve not considering them separately in the first place. As noted above, the tree and its environment cannot, and do not, exist independently of one another; that is, they have no independent existence. So why conceptualize them this way?

Obviously, there are problems in language. Individuals exist in intimate relation to the human systems they are part of, all the time, yet customarily split the unified field along dualistic lines. For example, managers in a corporation will speak of "the organization" and "we managers" in a way that suggests that they are not themselves an intrinsic part of the organization. "Agent" is artificially divided from "acted upon," "it" from "them," system from people. Phenomenologically, this is the kind of way in which most people apprehend reality, as a divided reality. A move may be made towards a field orientation—perceiving organizational systems as "humans in relation," or people as "system carriers," or the system as a human creation that then "creates" humans. But as with other changes in language suggested by Gestaltists, changes of this kind would have mainly an awareness-heightening function. Perhaps more—the women's and civil rights movements have demonstrated that changing language is a step in changing the shared phenomenology, a political act.

Language, however, is only one factor in sustaining (or replacing) a dualistic view of human affairs. Dominant paradigms of knowledge reinforce ideas of separateness and cause-effect relationships. These engender simpler views of reality. Thus, if something goes wrong, then let's find the person or "factor" to blame, the cause of the trouble, or where the responsibility lies. Assessing the morality of actions gets "too complicated" if you try and grasp more than one point of view (or at the most two). The "whole picture"—that a field orientation calls for—appears too complex, too vague, and too multivariate. There are, of course, those who embrace a field-orientated, holistic viewpoint and mistake it as a licence to be unfocused and vague. They take it to imply "the interdependence of everything" and are unwilling to do the work of understanding the structure of the field, the layers of meaning, the circular patterns of mutual influence, the rise and fall of different organizing needs, and the differentiations that occur within the field.

Since Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman spelled out the unitary field outlook in 1951, when it was indeed revolutionary, much has happened. Holistic medicine and environmental awareness have burgeoned. There is a new and developing cosmology. The complex interdependencies of humans and the systems of our fragile planet have been widely appreciated. The general outlook has shifted away from viewing reality in boxed categories, and what might be called "holistic competence" is more widespread.

It is a sobering thought—returning to the example of trees—that the destruction of the rainforests, with associated threat to continuance of human life, may depend on there existing a still widely accepted model of reality that is anti-holistic and enables people to regard trees as separate from their surrounding ecosystem. They are seen only in the context of commerce, as economic products, and other awarenesses are suppressed. The lack of holistic competence is woefully evident. Choosefully, by cultivating a unified field perspective, there is sensitization to the web of interconnection and interrelationship.

Undivided Existence

For Gestalt practitioners, even with a head start of nearly 50 years supposedly practicing nondualism, there is much still to do. In their working practice they can remember, again and again, that it is the organism-in-environment, person-in-situation, family-in-society that they are encountering. Problems, symptoms, and issues all too easily can be regarded as if they exist in isolation. As Wheeler (1991) urges his readers, Gestaltists need to work with elucidating the "structures of ground," the networks of identifications that are enduring in people's lives and
that rarely receive attention. (In investigating these, of course, they become temporarily “figure,” as Philippsen [1991] points out.)

A practical thing to be done, then, is choicefully to become more field sensitive, drawing on a wider range of relevances, instead of focusing on one part or one configuration of the field exclusively. The “medical model,” on the other hand, invites the therapist to do just that (e.g., to concentrate on diagnosing the cause of identified symptoms). An outlook of “hunting the reason” infiltrates many professions, as well as in popular and medical discourse (for instance, that a mass slaughter of children by a lone gunman—as happened recently in Dunblane, Scotland—can be “explained by his being an unhappy loner,” “occurs because he had easy access to guns,” or “the reason for his doing it was that he felt shunned by society”).

Instead, field theory allows for the portrayal of individual events in more complex ways that do not offend common sense. Thus, there is often a pattern of emergence where particular happenings “trigger” consequences, but where the trigger is less important than the existing “tension system” (Lewin, 1952). Expressions such as “a disaster waiting to happen” acknowledge this. One shot killed the Archduke Fritz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, setting off a chain of events leading to declarations of war on August 4th. Yet it was simply the spark that lit the fire. The war was virtually inevitable, given the buildup of tensions, positions previously taken up, and long-term trends such as the frenetic arms race between the German and British navies (Massie, 1992).

In the medical model, sickness may be attributed to a virus, then treated with appropriate medication (successfully or not). A more holistic, field-oriented medical approach acknowledges that numerous other factors are likely to have played a part as well. A depressed emotional state, poor nutrition, and atmospheric pollution all contribute to a weakened immune system. Field theory is, however, not about enumerating causes individually (or en masse). It is about acknowledging the individual’s undivided existence, that is, the unified field, which is organized. The person is not the illness: the illness forms part of a person’s whole “life space” (to use another term of Lewin’s to describe a person’s experiential field). An individual’s state-of-health has meaning, consequences, reverberations across her or his life and—inevitably—within the relationship systems of which she or he forms part.

The person, therefore, can be regarded as existing emotionally, physiologically, economically, and socially in a distinctive state of overall being, which may move from time to time from equilibrium to a state of disequilibrium. Events that occur can be reframed as shifts in the balance of forces in a person’s life, at least affecting (or being affected by) family or work-related developments, all forming part of the interconnected matrix. This is a long way from focusing on a single event with its explanation and its result.

In acknowledging undivided existence (see Wheeler, 1995, for an important related discussion), Gestaltists are also upholding another of their principles—that of staying close to experienced reality. The more abstracted and neatly categorized an event, the less attention tends to be given to the patterns of individual circumstance that surround and infuse the event, in all its complexity. For example, witnessing an argument between two people in an organization, which was labeled a mere “dispute over detail,” turned out to be far more. It was the surface manifestation of a whole web of philosophical, political, and personal differences between subgroups that “went back for years.” While a newcomer would not grasp the full significance of the disagreement, those with knowledge of the whole field did.

Once the unified field is appreciated as a phenomenon and concept, the work of the Gestalt practitioner is clear. It is to discover how exactly the field is organized currently, for example, what the “currently active gestalts” and projects are; the divisions and styles of boundary-making; the figural concerns of individual, group, or community, as well as the stable (or continuously regenerated) features that endure. The practitioner needs also to be tuned to the way in which earlier field configurations become continuously reactivated in the present—sometimes becoming part of the present field as potent “subrealities” that need addressing. Therapeutic work involves identifying the original organization of experience, that is, the field then, in which the current feelings, thoughts, movements, and so on were originally located, and then relocating them in the present, as part of the person’s field now. (Kepner, 1995, working with patients abused in childhood, speaks of “right figure, wrong ground” in order to convey these juxtapositions of time-related configurations within the present field.)

Moving between different organizations of the field is an important activity in therapy and in other Gestalt work. As Erving Polster (1987) reminds his readers, there is a place for the story. Stories can be told many ways. There are always different “grounds” for the same “figure,” a variety of story lines. Take the account of a death. It differs according to whether the death is seen as a devastating loss, a merciful release, an end of an era, a reminder of life’s brevity, or the culmination of years of making sense of the events. Someone loses his job, apparently through
being inefficient. The listener can be ready to locate the event as part of various configurations of meaning. These might include some familiar in therapy—for example, seeing the dismissal as one of many “rejections”—or in other ways that can easily be overlooked by therapists, such as viewing the dismissal against the background of “downsizing,” a 1990s commercial fashion already on the wane.

As practitioners, Gestaltists might become more curious, inviting those who tell them about something to give them more sense of the field as a whole. “To know all is to forgive all” is an old saying but is a useful reminder of the multicontextualized nature of most life phenomena. Exploring happenings from first one angle and then another can uncover layers of meaning. A “figure-bound” therapist might easily miss these. And seeing things in “a new light”—as a new and unexpected configuring of the field—is often what has most value.

**Some Implications for Understanding Adult Development**

Leaning into the different outlook of the unified field opens up other possibilities. Contributing to a more sophisticated model of adult development is one of them.

Two years after Vaclav Havel was chosen to be the first president in post-communist Czechoslovakia (as it then was), he wrote about what happened. He was unprepared and did not expect to be asked. Yet he agreed to do it. He writes: “I didn’t spend much time worrying about whether I was right for the job…. I was simply ‘pulled forward by Being.’” Although Havel had no experience of public speaking, he found himself “speaking extempore… to several packed public squares every day” with “no embarrassment, no stage fright, no hesitation, I did everything I had to do… negotiating confidently with heads of great powers, addressing foreign parliaments and so on. In short,” he goes on, “I was able to behave as masterfully as if I had been preparing and schooled for the presidency all my life… I became ‘an instrument of the time’. That special time caught me up in its wild vortex and… compelled me to do what had to be done… There was no choice. History—if I may put it this way—forged ahead through me, guiding my activities” (Havel, 1992).

Even allowing for Vaclav Havel being an unusually gifted man, this description shows how powerfully history and extreme situations can draw out untapped qualities. Situational changes can stimulate lasting personal change.

The example above suggests a modest revision to present ideas of development in adults. If personal and situational are not divided, but seen together as one realm, then changes in one part of the field will automatically lead to changes in other parts of the field as well. New conditions foster developmental shifts. Changed circumstances and novel situations require the individual—challenging him or her—to experiment and extend his/her range. As Vaclav Havel did, people literally invent new ways of being to deal with new contingencies.

The Gestalt experiment can thus be thought of as like a change in life circumstances. Experiments involve manipulating field conditions with individuals facing a challenge to respond other than in usual ways. As in life generally, changes in habitual patterns of behavior occur only if there is enough accompanying support in the field, linked to a compelling invitation to “risk doing something differently.” In the absence of these necessary conditions in the field, the individual is likely to back off, projecting familiar patterns from the past into the present and experiencing loss of contact or shame (Lee, 1995).

Important as therapy experiments can be, most developmental shifts obviously occur outside therapy by, for example, leaving home to spend time abroad, giving birth, receiving an inheritance, or dropping one career and starting another. Changes of a less extreme variety happen all the time, as a function of shifts in the field or life space. Healthy functioning depends on “adjusting creatively” to ever-changing circumstances.

Similarly, the Gestalt concept of “character” from a field theory perspective can be partially rethought. Perls (1988) pointed out how character limits people, not least by restricting their flexibility. Tied up with individuals’ fixed characteristics, in the habitual ways they live, are often situational accompaniments. For example, a man who is orderly and emotionally constrained may organize his field to support his orderliness and constraint. Provided the situation offers up the right conditions, he functions well. The field is in equilibrium. Probably he has found work where he is encouraged to be orderly and where emotional constraint is welcomed. But suppose the environment changes—say a new manager appears who expects people to be more open in their expression of feelings and who places no particular value on orderliness—then the man may feel threatened. His character and working conditions no longer fit; his field is disturbed. The alternative way of finding equilibrium would be for him to undergo a transformative experience, where he would literally have to “let go of his old self”; enter the void of unknowing; destructuring an old fixed gestalt; and “take on a whole new lease of life.” It can happen, as is well known, but it is not easy. Major shifts require a particular kind of calibrated support and challenge in the field. If these occur “naturally”—through a change in life circumstances such as a new marriage—then developmental steps may be taken. But many self-chosen circumstances effectively “fix” the char-
acter and mitigate against its dissolution. In these cases, character and ongoing situation further reinforce one another.

A Broader View of the Therapeutically Relevant

The perspective of the unified field can also sensitize practitioners to political questions. Politics, the environment, and social pressures are impacting the people that therapists and organizational consultants work with all the time. (They also impact the practitioners of course.) Every day, when they read a newspaper or switch on the television, patients or clients are re-immersed in an all-pervading culture that is taken for granted. The extent to which people fall into confluence with the culture or the extent to which they attempt to “stand apart,” as differentiated and self-supporting individuals, has exercised Gestalt therapists since the beginning. But some of the discussion seems to have been unrealistic.

Participation in the social world at all rests on there being at least some confluence and introjection, as Polster (1993) refreshingly points out. Lives are so entangled with the political, economic, and epistemological assumptions of our time that culture confluence is all-pervasive. To pretend otherwise is naive. Even determinedly individualistic people often align themselves (with or without awareness) with particular images or types that circulate within the pervading mass culture. No one is altogether immune.

In fact, human beings operate rather like fish, not noticing for much of the time the familiar, routine, and predictable nature of the most lived-in culture—the water they swim within. That is, until it changes. People travel to a different culture and return home. The confluence broken, they “see everything afresh.” People marry across cultures or become part of stepfamilies and they may “feel out of place” or they “take it like a duck to water.” Or families are displaced from their homes by war or natural disaster—there are an estimated 40 million refugees in the world—and their “world falls apart.”

In the unified field, disruptions of magnitude—like becoming a refugee—disrupt the habitual configurations of the field as a whole. If the “structures of ground” (Wheeler, 1991) are dislocated, the felt continuities of the self are also dislocated. Suppose there is strong identification with a stable system (e.g., a person is part of a close-knit family with a strong identity and derives most of his or her support and stimulation from within the boundaries of the family). In this case one might predict the individual’s loss of felt continuity will be profound if something major happens within the family. Once the two are put together, people and systems, individuals and groupings, and are regarded as inevitably joined as part of a unified field, what are deemed to constitute “social” changes, or alternatively “individual” changes, become increasingly arbitrary. And whether a therapist or facilitator is working with an “individual” issue or a “system” issue may become less relevant and less useful as a distinction.

Human beings, of course, exist within many systems and collectivities at the same time. They experience the intersection between different realities, many of which compete or conflict. Who has not felt uncomfortable having just seen pictures of African famine and then sitting down to a large meal? Ordinary people make the detailed arrangements of their own lives, and yet are also (inevitably and increasingly) world citizens, celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall or the signing of an agreement to end a war (as in Bosnia), or sharing in the Olympic Games via satellite TV. Through the medium of television in particular, individuals collectively share anguish with their fellow citizens after a huge natural disaster. As phenomenologically the world shrinks (or expands, according to the perspective taken), the great affairs of the planet become immediate, living room reality. And they impinge on everyone.

Yet in the small sphere of Gestalt practice, there can often be resistance to including attention to such wider issues in a personal growth or therapy context. During the Gulf War, the author encouraged members of a training group to talk about how the war was affecting them. Some said they “had had enough of the war and they wanted to get away from it” and did not think it was the stuff for a weekend of Gestalt therapy training. Others described being consumed by what had happened and an avoidance of the topic would have been an affront. As the group explored people’s realities, it became clear that almost everyone’s experience could be related to their own personal long-term issues and patterns—whether it was their attitudes to President Bush and to Saddam Hussein, or what upset them about the war and the degree to which they were upset, or about how right and wrong were delineated. Individuals invariably have certain predominant personal or family themes, relating to their primary unfinished situations, and these themes tend to recur over and over again. They are potentially or actually formative in the configuration of every field, including—in the example given—attitudes to a war.

Equally, of course, the exploration can proceed the other way around, from personal to political. By extending comprehension of personal styles, one can discern how these patterns spill out into attitudes taken up in the political sphere. The unfinished gestalts associated for each individual are uncovered, relating to such issues as power, responsibility, inequalities, conflict, injustice, retribution, guilt, and other themes that cross the divide—the artificial divide—between “personal” experience and meaning-making in the wider, collective world.
Gestalt practitioners have an interest in and commitment to heightening awareness. This might include awareness of how each individual or group manages the task of being alive at this point of history. For instance, if a man tends to give away his personal power by creating the other as an oppressor and himself as a victim, then is it not possible that this very dynamic, this same fixed gestalt, may also be played out in his choice of political affiliation? If a group of professionals recurrently leaves conflict unresolved between them, how does this pattern reflect and impact their political opinions or reactions more generally, for example, towards a local environmental dispute? If a woman likes confluent relationships and is offered a chance of membership in an organization where a high degree of confluence is manifest, will she be able to hold up against the consensus if she subsequently finds her associates are doing something immoral? Political and personal issues can be kept in separate compartments and often are, but the unified field perspective invites the Gestalt practitioner to set off in the opposite direction.

Arguably, if this direction is taken, the range of human experience encountered is greater than if the practitioner remains locked in a traditional separatist outlook. It suggests the need for what Zinker (1994) and others have called a rich “apprceptive mass.” To comprehend the lives of individuals in possibly new ways, there is perhaps an obligation to become more deeply familiar with, for instance, the arts, business and international affairs, and wisdom traditions, and have a historical perspective regarding the ways people live (Zeldin, 1994). Obviously, Gestalt practitioners cannot be experts on everything, but overconcentration on reading therapy texts might be questioned.

Co-Created Communities

Setting off in the opposite direction—integrating communal and political themes with personal material—leads to reflecting on the statement, “We create our systems, our systems create us.” There is a two-way process within the unified field. Members of systems introject, assimilate, go along with reluctantly, or actively rebel against what the systems offer—the norms, conventions, values, and beliefs that have become part of them or from which they seek to escape. The fact that many of these “system qualities” may be taken for granted (i.e., individuals are confluent with them) does not mean the individuals are not influenced by them or that they do not automatically share responsibility for how systems are and how they operate—again, often without full awareness. Even taking up an extremely oppositional stance is a form of participating; systems “create” rebels just as they “create” devotees.

At the same time, as members and stakeholders, individual system members are co-perpetuating and co-managing the systems of which they form a part, whether as activist proponents or as compliant participants or as grumbling fringe members. In effect they “carry” stable patterns of field organization that characterize the culture (or cultures) of the systems they belong to, especially those they identify with the most. Individuals can be thought of as holographic parts, each carrying “the whole” within them. Literally, they may “em-body” the collective’s values and assumptions—they know them somatically. Often the system’s characteristics affect, literally as well as metaphorically, where and how they stand and how they respond viscerally to changes in the system. They may feel “sickened” or “relieved in their stomach” or “feel a weight lifted from their shoulders” when some policy change is enacted or when the arrangement or composition of the system is altered.

Or, out of awareness, they may get sick or depressed.

Splitting, denial, and not taking responsibility are common when the unified field is not appreciated for what it is. These patterns were evident with a training group that had existed for two years. A particular group culture had become established. Certain ways of talking, implicit prohibitions, and ways of dealing with conflict had become dominant. Others had fallen away. The group’s members had become confluent with each other, accepting these ingrained features as unchangeable “givens.” They had introjected (perhaps from one another) what “one was supposed to do here.” People who stepped out of line were given a hard time.

The culture—perceived as a whole—was variously described. A coworker and the author (not their regular trainers) were struck by its being “ungenerous.” Others saw it as “blaming” (especially towards their regular trainers) or as “unsafe.” One woman from Northern Ireland said that she had lived in Derry with the permanent threat of bombs and shooting but had never felt as scared as she was in this group.

As the facilitators brought more and more of the life of the group—its shared field—into the open, its members began to realize how they limited themselves. They took fewer risks in the group than elsewhere in their lives and coped in odd ways that made them feel neurotic. They were dissipating their creativity and fearlessness. The group’s activity was organized around training needs, and every part of the training program was influenced by the “drag” of the culture.

The facilitators confronted the group with what each of them was doing individually. They recognized how they had reinforced the culture from which they now suffered. And some—just a few individuals to begin with—realized they could help change the culture. The precise ways in which they undermined others was pointed out to them, as well
as how they could communicate differently. They experimented, not least, with fresh habits of speech. Individuals who took the risk of contacting other group members in a different-from-usual way were courageous; they reported having to “wear themselves up” in order to act boldly in defiance of the established patterns. Others followed, feeling perhaps that the group was not now such a dangerous place after all. They too now marshalled their own self-support to add to the communal exchanges. These took on a different quality. Members discovered that while it was not altogether safe to take risks, they had to take risks in order to feel safe.

This story underlines how easily individuals overlook their responsibility for their co-created communities. By putting “oneself” here and “the system” over there, one can continue a dualistic view of the world in which responsibility is much less pronounced. Adopting the unified field perspective wholeheartedly entails individuals recognizing that they are not just in a group but are the group. They constitute the systems they are in; they are part of their system’s existence as the system is of theirs.

It is not surprising, then, that those experiments conducted by social psychologists—where people became unwitting participants in an all-embracing unusual setting (like a mock prison)—sometimes bring out wholly “alien” behavior that is at odds with how the participants generally react in life. Manipulating people by manipulating their environment is a favorite controlling device for those in power. It takes a particular kind of developed self-support to survive social pressures that are alien and oppressive—differentiating a zone of self, which remains clearly bounded within the field. To resist the prevailing currents in the field in rugged “field-independent” (Witkin, 1962) fashion at certain times is part of creative adjustment, as—in other circumstances—is also “bowing to the inevitable” and choicefully “going with the flow.”

The traditional emphasis placed on self-responsibility in the Gestalt approach has led to emphasizing that each individual has personal choice and a capacity for enhanced self-support. Recognizing the inevitable membership of community suggests that full self-responsibility extends to being partly responsible for the collective as well. There is no escape: even political apathy or uninvolved does not mean individuals have no influence, but rather that they simply have an influence of a particular type.

As Gestalt practitioners (whatever the area of working—e.g., as child therapists, organization development consultants, social workers), there are certain shared presuppositions and concepts. The unified field is a linking idea across the whole range of Gestalt practice. However great the difference in kinds of practice, it is self-evident that each practitioner, when working (or even when not doing so), is operating in an ever-changing field of one kind or another. And each field offers up complex and unique circumstances; it evolves and springs surprises and at other times seems rigidified and stuck. Initially, therapists, group leaders, or consultants have the status of visitors, with the “fresh eye of the newcomer.” As they become more familiarized, their status changes to being more like “residents”, and the need to maintain some felt sense of separateness is perhaps more pressing. As participants or co-creators of the collective field, practitioners are responsible for “their part of it.” There is “fall-out” from each of the practitioners’ individual choices, for example, regarding self-disclosure, stretching or rigidifying boundaries, or the polarities focused on specifically. Such generic issues of practice, the author suggests, might be relocated within a field theory framework that all kinds of Gestalt practitioners can share. The concept of the unified field may help unify the field of the Gestalt community.

In Conclusion

The founders of Gestalt therapy never lost sight of the wider political and communal context. If Paul Goodman (a social theorist and self-styled utopian) and Eliot Shapiro (an educational reformer), along with Fritz and Laura Perls and others in the original New York group, were suddenly alive again today, here in their full 1950s vigor, what would particularly interest them?

Speculatively, they might be less interested in the small field of Gestalt therapy and its derivatives than might be expected. Instead, the author believes, they would concentrate on wider issues of our era, such as the decline of local communities as systems of support or the impact of “space time compression” and the increased speed of living or the accompanying desensitization of physical and sensory life. They might well be scathing about the alienation and mindlessness induced by the shopping mall, daytime TV, and medically prescribed drugs. What is certain is that they would not overlook the wider changes of society—cultural, social, technological, environmental. Also, they would temper their critiques with suggestions for personal and collective action and, probably, be enthusiastic for change rather than despairing or cynical.

Given the heritage of Gestalt therapy, it is surprising (and disappointing) how subsequent generations of Gestalt practitioners have written so little about sociopolitical questions. Undoubtedly, practitioners, especially therapists in private one-to-one practice, have sometimes felt powerlessness in the face of collective suffering engendered by racism, unemployment, crime, and war. But it has remained a private worry.

James Hillman, an independent-minded Jungian, has publicly raised fundamental questions about therapy. In his now famous 1992 book with Michael Ventura, We Have Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World Is Getting Worse, he concludes that, far from being an answer to
human problems in the late twentieth century, therapy may even encourage people into a private journey, often focusing on past abuse, rather than enabling people to stand up and fight present-day abuse against the person, for example, atmospheric and noise pollution, inescapable commercialism, violence in the streets. They suggest that individuals and communities need to wake up, sense their outrage, and act politically (Hillman and Ventura, 1992).

Hillman is not suggesting there is no place for therapy at all. Nor did Laura Perls (1992). Asked by friends why she wasn’t more politically active, she replied: “I think the work I am doing is political work. If you work with people to get them to the point where they can think on their own and sort themselves out from the majority confluences, it’s political work and it radiates even if we can work with only a very limited number of people.” In short, Gestalt therapists can embrace a more outward looking agenda without abandoning therapy. Given the interactive nature of the unified field, changes in individuals arising in therapy can result in increments of change throughout their relationship systems and in society generally, like ripples extending outwards.

At the same time, a deeper appreciation of the unified field provokes questioning of what, in the future, the collective Gestalt contribution might be to the field of practical work with human beings and their personal and collective lives. For instance, are there new forms of Gestalt practice that might work more directly with the field as focus rather than the person as focus? Where customary forms of therapy and consultation do not fully “match” endemic problems in people’s lives today, what new forms might be invented? What reorientation of Gestalt theory and practice is called for, if the vision of the unified field becomes brighter, clearer and more central? Such questions invite new thinking.

Acknowledgments

My progressive understanding of field theory has grown out of the writings, among Gestaltists, of Gary Yontef, Gordon Wheeler, Hunter Beaumont, and Joel Latner in particular, and I am immensely grateful to them. John Wheway, Judith Hemmings, Jennifer Mackew, Jude Higgins, and Janice Seville-Hine read an earlier draft of the paper and have helped me significantly in clarifying my ideas. My thanks to them too. All of them are absolved from muddles or errors that remain.

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