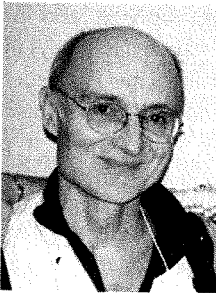


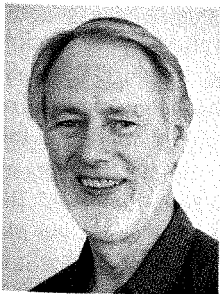
Contemporary Gestalt Therapy: Field Theory

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INTRODUCTION: AN APPROACH GROUNDED IN THE IDEAS OF GESTALT'S FOUNDING BOOK

Gestalt therapy has not stood still. The first decades after its founding were a time of experiment in practice rather than of theory development. However, three Gestalt classics stem from that time (Latner, 1973; Polster & Polster, 1973; Zinker, 1977), all of which have stood the test of time. In the last quarter-century, theoretical writing has expanded dramatically. The numbers of new Gestalt books and professional journals indicate that there is growing interest worldwide in the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy, and part of what gives Gestalt therapy its contemporary relevance is its distinctive theoretical outlook.

One cannot appreciate the way Gestalt theory has developed without acknowledging the continuing influence of the founding text, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, by Frederick Perls, Ralph Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, first published in 1951 (a revised version appeared in 1994 and is now the definitive edition). Their text remains the starting point for any contemporary Gestalt theorist. Some writers stay close to its language, concepts, and theoretical priorities, whereas others stretch the original ideas in new directions and change the language. All agree that the book was years ahead of its time in its conception of human beings in society and in pointing the way for therapy.

Obviously, the wider world of psychology and psychotherapy has undergone huge changes since *Gestalt Therapy* was first published. Gestalt therapists have integrated insights, concepts, and methods, such as the developmental work of Daniel Stern (1985), and have acknowledged other movements, such as that within psychoanalysis toward a more intersubjective view of therapy (see Jacobs, 1992). At the same time, too much susceptibility to influences from outside has also prompted unease. There is a constant tension—especially for authors and editors of journals and books—between what is new and exciting

BOB: Malcolm, it is with pleasure that I join you in a conversation around your eloquently written and comprehensive chapter on Gestalt field theory. As to what you have presented above, supporting and even celebrating differences has always been a hallmark of Gestalt therapy. So, as you say, it is not surprising that there are differences in understanding of basic theory. Equally important is the emphasis in Gestalt therapy on dialogue between differences. Reflecting on what you have said about the enduring quality of Gestalt theory, for myself, a major attraction of Gestalt theory is its basic conceptualization of a person meeting his/her environment, called contact, which is the crucible for living, evolving, and thriving. This basic theoretical stance has always made it easy for me to assimilate my life experience into how I understand what it means to be human and to work with others. It places people in a field context from the start and makes possible an understanding of field properties and dynamics, which you are about to explore with us, and which are not so understandable from other theoretical perspectives.

MALCOLM: I like very much your comment about contact—that it is “the crucible for living, evolving, and thriving.” I recall Carl Hodges remarking that “contact organizes the field,” and we are doing that here, in this first exchange between us—we are organizing the field of “Bob-Malcolm-dialogue.” There is the field of the reader, the book, the ideas of this chapter, and now there is the field of you, Bob, and me—a field within a field. But we are leaping ahead here. I look forward to co-creating the temporary field of our dialogue.

and necessary to attend to and what is essential for the preservation of Gestalt therapy as a distinct tradition.

Famously, Laura Perls (1992c), co-founder of the approach with Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman, encouraged therapists to draw on “whatever life experience and professional skills” they have “assimilated and integrated in [their] background” (p. 133). Given this “permission” for Gestalt therapists and theorists to pursue their own directions, it is not perhaps so surprising that there is also diversity in what theory has focused on. As Robine (2001) pointed out, there are significant inconsistencies worldwide in what is understood as basic theory. However, for all the variation, there are also areas of convergence that have become more apparent in the last 20 years, and I will focus on them in this chapter. I appreciate that others are likely to disagree with the “version” I am presenting.

A DEFINING PERSPECTIVE

The foremost convergence that I discern centers on the concepts of “field” and “field theory.” Two editions of a popular textbook devoted to Gestalt therapy that appeared in the 1980s did not even have “field” in the indexes (Van de Riet, Korb, & Gorrell, 1980/1989). But almost all writing today includes and discusses field theory, the field perspective, the relational field, or the field paradigm. *Field* has become one of the most frequently used terms in current Gestalt literature. Though hard to define precisely (and there is variation from author to author), the concept of the field has become both indispensable and theoretically central. The field is the medium in which therapy takes place and is inseparable from it. The field is the entire situation of the therapist, the client, and all that goes on between them. The field is made and constantly remade. When we talk of the “atmosphere changing,” we are talking about the field. When we acknowledge that the therapist’s and client’s “overall level of trust and ease with each other” has developed (increased or decreased) over time, we are reflecting on a development of the overall field. The communication has changed, as have the individuals, as has the scope of what is possible for the two parties to do together. Something occurs in the overall organization of what is happening. What I am describing may be difficult to pin down, but every experienced practitioner learns to pay attention to this overall organization, the situation as a whole—that is, to the field. This degree of focus on the field does not appear to have affected the thinking of any other major psychotherapeutic approach to the same extent, and it suggests that Gestalt therapy’s “field perspective” is critical in defining the approach. That the essential ideas were extensively prefigured in *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls et al., 1951) underlines how influential was the founding orientation.

In this chapter we shall be returning again and again to the field perspective as a linking theme that lends overall coherence to the distinctive, widely shared outlook of contemporary Gestalt therapists.

THE “UNITARY” PERSPECTIVE IN GESTALT THERAPY

One of the major influences on Gestalt therapy, the school of Gestalt psychology, emphasized that human perception and thinking were structured and patterned and should not be “reduced” in an atomistic way into component parts. If psychology was to have relevance to

people's experiences, to how people lived and thought and perceived, then psychologists needed to be observing patterning and relationship, whole configurations and complex interactions, rather than chopping up nature and experience into underlying sensations or stimulus-response units in the manner of reductionist science.

Likewise, the founders of Gestalt therapy sought to do justice to the complex, indivisible world of phenomenological experience in "holistic" fashion. That is, a person's familial and social world, organizations and culture, as well as his or her biological nature, had to be considered together, not as if they existed in separate compartments. Human beings were not to be regarded in isolation from their natural settings, each individual alone with his or her "intrapsychic" psychological processes. As Latner (1992) wrote,

Most psychological theories are . . . of this type. They look for the individual and the individual's psychological properties, ego states, cognition, tendencies to self-realization or to individuation. These are objects, the equivalents of a planet in a Newtonian universe. Alternatively, the new [field] perspective looks at the dimensions of interplay in time and space, the effects of relatedness over time. (p. 21)

In Gestalt therapy, the "unitary" outlook, the relationship between parts and whole, and the balancing of connecting with others while also maintaining a separate identity have been central preoccupations. The concept of field as a unitary, encompassing concept appealed to the authors of *Gestalt Therapy*. They wrote as follows:

In any psychological investigation whatever, we must start from the interacting of the organism and its environment. . . . Let us call this interacting of organism and environment in any function the "*organism/environment field*," and let us remember that no matter

BOB: As you say, Gestalt's holistic stance enables a fuller, more integrated understanding of people's experience. The simplicity and complexity of this concept can be illustrated in what you are starting to say and what you further present later about the complex, layered nature of the "field." The term *field* can have several different meanings and is often used interchangeably between these meanings, frequently within the same article. It is difficult to do otherwise. *The field* can be used to refer to the many environmental conditions and influences that conceptualize our existence, relating to all or specific elements of family, culture, gender, friendship network, nationality, economic conditions, spirituality, geographical location, political atmosphere, occupation, physical health, and so much more. In this vein, we all exist in multiple "fields" simultaneously. But our own personal qualities, such as our hopes, fears, skills, limitations, emotional state, energy, needs, and style, our accumulated experience and beliefs, our sense of our possibilities for connection and disconnection, these are part of our "field" as well. And to return to where I started, as you have presented, these two parts of our "field" are not separate. They are intimately intertwined, inextricably interwoven into wholes of perception and involvement.

MALCOLM: As you say, there is no question that exact definitions of the field, or even precise descriptions of any particular field, are very difficult. Physicists have the same difficulty in elaborating field concepts in the physical realm. They are elusive, slippery, and difficult to pin down. Yet field concepts are necessary, certainly when speaking of human beings and the nature of our experience; we need them to describe holistic processes, the intimate interplay between human beings and their experienced worlds, the milieu in which they exist, forming part of the scene themselves. Of course, there is a potential difficulty in that the field can become so inclusive as to

how we theorize about impulses, drives, etc., it is always to such an *interacting field* that we are referring, and not to an isolated animal. (Perls et al., 1994, p. 4, italics added)

The signal achievement, in the 1940s and 1950s, was for Perls and Goodman to have predated insights that have since become commonplace. Today, in biology, anthropology, developmental psychology, and numerous other areas of human inquiry, it is taken for granted that to study separately animals and habitats, mothers and babies, ecosystems and land-use patterns is to set off on the wrong path: They need to be seen as indivisibly connected and inseparable and studied in a “unitary” way.

The radical outlook proposed by Goodman and Perls was not altogether or easily assimilated, even by Gestalt therapists themselves: Wheeler (1990), for example, argued that Fritz Perls himself lacked an emphasis on field in his later writing. In the contemporary era, in much of medicine and psychology, reductive tendencies and a dualistic biomedical outlook still predominate. Even in much psychological treatment and therapy as practiced today, an individual’s problems are seen as primarily a matter of “personal psychopathology,” something to do with “what is going on inside” him or her, and to be diagnosed and treated by a detached clinician who does not “get involved.” The Gestalt therapy idea is different: One must begin by regarding the “whole field” of the therapy. This includes, as has already been said, the experiences of both the client and therapist separately and together, their patterns of contact and engaging with each other, and the multiple complexities of the relationship between them as manifested moment by moment—and cumulatively over time (Shub, 1992).

The “unitary perspective” is hard to acquire in an intellectual culture that is so dualistic and compartmentalized. The founders of Gestalt therapy thought not only that this way of thinking and perceiving reality was important for understanding human behavior but that dualistic thinking helped to destroy a sense of wholeness in people’s lives.

include anything and everything: It is important to differentiate the “relevant ground” that goes with the figure of interest and to be specific without being exclusionary or fixed. In discussing the “principle of possible relevance”—about including too much (Parlett, 1991)—I wrote, “[W]hat is most relevant and pressing is readily discoverable in the present. Instead of exhaustively documenting what is in the field, there is attention to what is momentarily or persistently relevant or interesting—and this will show how the field is organized” at any one time. The unitary approach I describe is in contrast to what happens usually when human beings try and describe reality: They chop it up, divide it into parts, split things up, rather than keeping them together and seeking to describe the seamless continuity, which is how we experience actual lived life. It is as if fences are erected and then people think the land is not one continuous land any more—but it is, of course. As you say, we exist in many fields simultaneously, but they are not neatly differentiated and separated. As I said earlier, the field of our conversation exists within the field of the chapter content, author, and reader but is not entirely separate from it.

BOB: Yes, as you have referred to in the chapter, people’s chopping up their experience is reflective of what works, is accepted or appropriate in their culture and in sync with how they are defined by others. For example, people are often told in our culture that if they are to succeed they must develop “self” confidence, as if this task were solely up to them. This perspective breaks the unitary, seamless continuity of their relational experience and puts the focus solely on them. What people actually develop when they develop so-called “self” confidence is confidence in others’ interest in and ability to respond to them, which is achieved relationally, not solely individually. And this is only one of the many examples of how our culture expects people to split their experience.

“We believe that the Gestalt outlook is the original, undistorted, natural approach to life, that is, to man’s thinking, acting, feeling. The average person, having been raised in an atmosphere of splits, has lost his Wholeness, his Integrity” (Perls et al., 1994, p. xxiv). Gestalt therapy was about restoring the sense of a unity or wholeness of experience and of living.

FIELD THEORY AND THE INFLUENCE OF KURT LEWIN

Gestalt therapists, wishing to take further the field-related ideas of the founding book, have increasingly looked to the work of Kurt Lewin (1890–1948). Of the previous generation of Gestalt psychologists, he was the one who had elaborated ideas of field most extensively. His ambition was to establish ideas of field in scientific terms.

The term *field* was an importation from physics. Michael Faraday and James Maxwell had introduced the word into physics in the 1840s to mean the magnetic field. The word itself was originally taken from the name given to the background in heraldic shields. The magnetic field is demonstrated in the elementary physics experiment where iron filings are sprinkled on paper placed on top of a magnet. The specific patterns displayed are a representation of the magnetic field and the configuration of forces within it. Change the position of the magnet and the whole pattern shifts. Put a second magnet or metal object under the paper, and the field and the pattern of iron filings are altered drastically (see *Experiential Activity #1*).

Lewin’s (1952) idea was that in psychology, too, various forces, vectors, and “influences” act together to produce a specific, unique outcome in a particular situation at a particular time. Each force affects the others in a complex interactive relationship. Lewin called the ideas and thinking that surround the central concept of field “field theory.” The field is an informing metaphor to help in describing complex interrelating events, both “external” social forces and “internal” personal drives and needs that in practice are all interacting and affecting each other. They “come together,” and trying to take them apart and study them one at a time and independently means falling into the reductionist trap.

In general, conceptual terms, *field* in Gestalt therapy can be defined as “a totality of mutually

BOB: However, as McConville (2001a) says, “There is no field . . . unless we are referring to a field that includes, as a co-constitutive pole, an engaged subjectivity. Fields cannot be spoken of properly as existing in themselves, in nature, apart from a co-constitutive human subjectivity” (pp. 200–201). And to reflect a bit more on the difficulty of characterizing or speaking about the “field,” this means that in any given situation there is not just one “field” of one person, who exists in many “fields” simultaneously. Instead, in another sense, there are as many “fields” as there are participants and observers. And these “fields” are not isolated “fields” but are, again as you present, highly influenced by each other and with any given event or series of events will contain much shared co-constructed material. This just illustrates the difficulty of conceptualizing the “field.” But for the purpose of addressing a particular field, I like your notion that what is most relevant and pressing about any field is readily discoverable in the present. For those of our readers who would like further clarification of this complex, layered nature of the field, I suggest your article (Parlett, 1997) and Lynne Jacobs’s article (2003).

MALCOLM: We are back to the slippery definitions and difficulty in pinning down what a field actually *is*, where it begins and ends, and so forth. It really does mean that care needs to be exercised in how the concept is used, not as

influencing forces that together form a unified interactive whole" (Yontef, 1993, p. 297). However, in using such a broad and inclusive general concept, it is also necessary to "define" the field that one is talking about at the time. As Yontef (2001) asserts, "[A] field can only be defined in relation to its parts and to the larger field of which it is part" (p. 84), and "[T]he field is defined according to your purpose" (p. 85). In other words, a lot of the meaning has to be derived from the context of use. This matter of the usage of the term *field* is itself a good example of how the "figure" makes sense only when the wider context or "ground" is made clear as well, the figure and ground together composing "the field" that needs to be appreciated as a whole.

a catch-all general category but in connection with precise descriptions of phenomena. I shall go on later to point out that some theorists consider that fields may have an independent physical existence, albeit not one that can be measured within the present paradigms of scientific knowledge. However, we are at the limits of knowledge here, and I would agree with McConville that an "engaged subjectivity" is necessary to *register* or *experience* a field of the kind that we are talking about here.

THEORY INTO PRACTICE: FIELD THEORY PRINCIPLES THAT INFORM CLINICAL METHOD

"Field theory can hardly be called a theory in the usual sense," said Kurt Lewin (1952, p. 45). Rather, it is a set of principles, an outlook, a method, and a whole way of thinking that relates to the intimate interconnectedness between events and the settings or situations in which these events take place. So *theory* in this case denotes a general theoretical outlook or way of appreciating reality that involves, in Lewin's words, "looking at the total situation" (p. 288) and being willing to address and investigate the organized, interconnected, interdependent, interactive nature of complex human phenomena. There are many features of the field perspective in Gestalt therapy, and they have fundamental implications for how therapists practice.

1. The therapist, or "observer," is not detached, objective, separated from the field but rather a part of it.

As Latner (1992) wrote,

The field includes those who study or observe it. Since all the aspects of the field are related, there is no way to know a field except within it, as a part of it. Thus, studying the field means including yourself in your study. . . . Therapy includes the therapist. What takes place in therapy is created by both the therapy and the person or persons who come to therapy, and the therapeutic work is the work done by all the individuals in the room. (pp. 20–21)

In the simplest case of two individuals meeting, something comes into existence that is a product of neither of them exclusively. Beaumont (1993) pointed out that

contact is clearly a creative process. . . . When we contact one another we *gestalt* ourselves and also the other. Contact is not passive perception of a fixed objective reality, but rather

the *creation* of a phenomenal experimental reality. . . . Contact is . . . a mutually creative interaction. Each participates in the creation of the other. (p. 90)

With this “co-created” reality, a shared field comes into existence. We can use the analogy of a dance: Each dancer has a repertoire of preferred sequences, movements, rhythms, or dance steps. Two dancers create a dance together that is a product of each dancer’s creativity and self-regulation in light of the other dancer’s dance. At a particular time, the dance seems to “take over.” The field itself, once organized and structured, begins to “regulate the dancers” (Parlett, 1991, p. 76).

These ideas link with those about the dialogic relationship in therapy (Yontef, 1993), in which the therapist is enjoined to be authentic, a real person acting in a “horizontal” relationship, rather than to take up the more “vertical” position of the professionally removed expert. He or she cannot stand outside the relationship but is co-creating what happens within it. (We shall return to this theme later.)

2. The field is organized, and therapy involves the mutual investigation of how it is organized.

Lewin (1952) wrote,

Whether or not a certain type of behavior occurs depends not on the presence or absence of one fact or a number of facts as viewed in isolation, but upon the constellation (the structure and forces) of the specific field as a whole. The “meaning” of the single fact depends upon its position in the field. (p. 150)

Meaning derives from looking at the total situation, the totality of coexisting facts. Further,

[e]verything is interconnected and the total situation needs to be taken into account. Properties of things are ultimately defined by their context of use. Thus, a table can be used as a surface for writing or for serving a meal upon. It can be sat on and becomes a seat or turned upside-down can represent a boat for a child playing. In other words, rather than thinking in terms of the enduring properties of objects which are held to be constant, their characteristics are defined by a *wider organization of overall meaning*, which emphasizes interdependence. (p. 149, italics in original)

The development of field theory is partly an attempt to put into some coherent and rational-sounding form what many sensitive, socially aware, and intelligent human beings do anyway—that is, respond to the total circumstances pertaining to a situation in ways that are creative and effective. Gestalt therapists learn to be skilled in observing the situation as a whole and “noticing the process.” This means realizing, for instance, when “the time is right to propose something new,” when it is time to change the activity or take a break, or when collective energy is beginning to drop within a group discussion. These observations are “felt” or “sensed” rather than “worked out”—they come, not from application of a rule or theory, but as total human responses that the majority of people are well able to make and that are raised to high prominence in the training of Gestalt therapists (and Gestalt organizational consultants; see Nevis, 1987). Awareness of the field that one is in, and of the different

conventions and tacit assumptions that operate in that field, is the development of sensitivity to context and to what is "appropriate" or "called for" in a situation. Gestalt therapists are to be skilled in recognizing how the field is organized.

Present-day Gestalt therapy recognizes the importance of having many different ways of working, according to the circumstances and contextual background that are part of the present field. The general shift in direction away from anything like "fixed techniques" is an indication of the need to attend to the organization of the field as it is encountered in the moment. Mackewn (1997) expressed it well:

Gestalt is a field approach; so there is no "right way" of intervening; no "right intervention." This is not the same as saying that any intervention will do. Some interventions are certainly better than others, at certain points. The choice of approach or intervention depends upon all the field conditions at the time and is a matter of fine discrimination. Factors affecting the choice include the personality type and ego strength of the client and counselor, the length and aims of the counseling, the circumstances in which the counseling takes place, the holistic energetic process of the client, the recent present and past life experiences of the client, the stage of the counseling process and so on. Developing the ability to be aware of and take account of all these field conditions requires a native interest in and talent for fine observation, experiential and theoretical training, lots of practice and plenty of professional support. (p. 219)

3. Gestalt therapists work in the "here and now" and explore the immediate, present field.

The field is not a static entity but is in constant flux. A new piece of information, a sudden realization, a momentary mismatch between therapist and client, can "alter everything." A field can change dramatically in a moment. The therapist attends both to the subtle and often rapid changes that can occur and to relatively stable field configurations. In "analyzing" the field, no particular special causal status is accorded to events in the past, which in many therapy systems may be thought of as "determinants" of what is happening now. Likewise, future events, planned or fantasized, are not given special status (as "goals" or "incentives") but again are seen as part of what is occurring in the present. In other words, it is the constellation of influences in the present field that both "explains" behavior and constitutes the actual present experience of the client (and the therapist) that is being investigated. As part of the present, there may be times of "recollecting last week" or "planning for next week."

Staying with the unfolding of here-and-now experience is one of the well-recognized central features of Gestalt therapy. Yet its basis in a field

BOB: A question that comes to me here is, How do Gestalt therapists make their way in this discovery of the organization of the field, of which they are an integral part? For me, it is following the energy in the field, particularly highlighted through the signs of shame, belonging, and yearning (which are not just individual characteristics but field variables), that guides me through the maze of field information. This points the way both to areas where people's sense of connection is based on a sense of belonging and areas where people's attempts, or lack of attempts, at connection are informed by a sense of isolation, mistrust, despair, desperation, hopelessness, or uncertainty. In the latter cases, in which there is insufficient perceived support for yearnings, what is usually seen are people's attempts to cope with the

outlook is not always appreciated. The field's constant change means that the therapist needs to be fully attentive and "present." As Zinker (1987) wrote: "Presence implies being here fully, with all of one's body and soul—open to all possibilities" (p. 5). Spagnuolo Lobb (2003b) emphasized the importance of the "improvisational" element in Gestalt therapy. Describing a therapy sequence in some detail, she concluded that the therapist "feels there is a strong emotional involvement between them [the therapist and the client] and has to take a decision on how to use it therapeutically." She continued:

This is the phase that Stern et al. (1998) called the "now moment; . . . now moments are like the ancient Greek concept of *Kairos*, a unique moment of opportunity that must be seized, because your fate will turn on whether you seize it and how" (p. 991). This is the crucial moment in the therapeutic session. . . . Therapeutic co-creation works on an improvisational basis: it cannot happen thanks to premeditated, known, schematic, knowledgeable processes. . . . [I]t is similar to the sophisticated ability of the jazz player who has all the musical knowledge in her/his blood and is able to be fresh, strong, contactful and unique in her/his playing.

4. The therapist attends to exploring different parts of the field.

Wheeler (1991) has argued that Gestalt therapy has sometimes focused too much on what is "figural" to the detriment of ongoing structures of the field. He reminds us that crucial parts of present experience are based on "organized features" that endure "across situations and over time" and that "infuse and constrain the figures of contact themselves." Psychotherapy is "always a matter of reorganization of these structures of ground over time." The work can be "hampered by (an) over-emphasis on figure" as opposed to the wider field from which figures emerge (p. 3).

shame that covers their yearnings. Interventions aimed at only controlling or changing people's "troublesome" or "inappropriate" behavior that can manifest in such cases, without understanding the field nature of, and condition of support for, the underlying yearning(s), are most often doomed to failure in the long run. People may not even be aware of their needs and yearnings if they do not perceive sufficient support for them. So discovering the organization of the field, of which I am a part, is an ongoing process that continues with each interaction/intervention. (For our readers, see Lee, 2004; Wheeler, 2003a. Also see Lee, 2001, for a case study illustrating the above approach.)

MALCOLM: You raise many points that are of importance in therapy. My own answer to your question about "how Gestalt therapists discover the organization of the field when they are part of it" is that we need to pay attention to our overall experience, particularly as mediated through our bodily reactions, feeling states, sensations. Unless we are attuned and aware, we are likely to miss some major parts of our potential experience. We experience the field through all our senses. So "following the energy in the field" requires a whole-being response, *felt* and *sensed* as much as (or more than) *thought about*. This said, what do I look for that reveals the field organization? The answer is many things: what appears unfinished, awkward, unsaid; what puzzles or alarms me, or sends me to sleep; what I feel I am being led to notice, and what I am being led away from noticing; what the client or patient is doing, not doing, stops him/herself from doing; and, of course, how I am experiencing the client's apparent experiencing of me—the whole intersubjective, co-created nature of the therapy as it is happening now, and the mutual influencing that is taking place between us, in both explicit and implicit ways. I certainly attend to issues of shame, fear, agency, etc., but I do want to emphasize *how*

Others who worry that some of the original formulations of Gestalt therapy theory were overly simple echo Wheeler's cautions. For instance, Fodor (1998) wrote: "Gestalt therapy highlights awareness and uses the medium of therapeutic dialogue (contact) to facilitate the awareness process. A basic assumption is that awareness itself is the curative factor in therapy" (p. 62). She suggests it is important to move

beyond awareness itself as the goal of therapy to a focus on *knowledge acquisition* as the focus of our therapeutic work. . . . Awareness-enhancing work will continue to be essential, but more attention [could] be given to the ways we gain knowledge, make decisions, and structure experience. (p. 62)

The various points made are indicative of the ways contemporary Gestalt therapists practice. In Mackewn's (1997) words, these are not

bound by tracking or staying with the *client's figure* but may make any aspect of the field figural. In shuttling attention between different aspects of the field, we will constantly be reconfiguring the field as we make new elements figural and others ground. (p. 179)

The field perspective calls us to consider human behavior and experience in a much wider context, being open to long-term patterns and persistent styles of self-organization. The client is seen within his or her family context, and in some cases in relation to social, economic, or other "impersonal" forces with which individual beings have to grapple and that they are likely to reflect and embody (Parlett, 2000).

In short, there has been a significant movement in Gestalt therapy practice away from short-term work in which the directive to focus on the immediate "here and now" was, with mistaken zeal, interpreted far too literally. The "there-and-then" reality of, say, a restimulated childhood trauma, or "here-and-then" attention to, for instance, how the client is "still resentful towards the therapist from last week's session," or the "there-and-now" reporting of some significant contemporary event in the person's work or home life all have their place. These different field configurations can be subsumed within the overall "here-and-now" field of the present session—as "subfields" or fields within fields. The field can be thought of as "laminated," and as therapists we can move between layers and levels, switching frames or positions according to what "carries energy" or has been long ignored (because it does not "carry energy"). Thus we, as therapists, can reach deeply into the past in a regressive reenactment on one occasion, whereas at another time, in different conditions, we can insist on looking at the present relationship with the therapist, today in this room now. We can switch the emphasis from reality to role play, from experiencing something at a physical bodily level to visual fantasy, to searching for a metaphor, to telling the

these are appreciated—primarily in the sensing-feeling modality. I realize how big and important is the question you raise!

BOB: I fully support with you the whole-being stance that is needed to explore and take in information in a field. You have eloquently captured this process, which I jumped over. Still, for me a large part of discovering the organization of the field involves how I organize what I become aware of in my exploration of both my sensations and other material that is available to notice in the field. With each of the possibilities that you mention (i.e., "what appears unfinished, awkward"), my own style is to become curious in how that might be an expression of belonging and/or an expression of a disconnect in the field. But I realize that I am getting ahead of things a bit here, as you touch on this subject, as well as other things that I have referred to here, later in the chapter.

story. We can notice not just the immediate figure that is present but ongoing features, the structures and repetitive patternings arising in the field. And, as Kepner (1995) pointed out, a past figure can be relocated against a present ground—often essential in recovery from traumas in the past.

In other words, the versatility and power of the therapist to engage fully and deeply with the client and his or her reality are often enhanced by “movement within the field” as well as by “reconfiguring the field.” This may entail changing the ground (as Kepner said, from past to present) or reframing experience (e.g., “What are the benefits that come from this disaster?”), or changing what is figure and what is ground (e.g., “I notice that I have been attending to your distress, and now I am acknowledging your courage”).

THE THERAPEUTIC FIELD

Gestalt therapy began as an offshoot of psychoanalysis and in reaction to it. Mid-20th-century psychoanalysis was still espousing a view of human beings as led by instincts. Unconscious needs and characterological defenses “explained” human behavior. The therapist was a would-be scientific observer, detached and supposedly uninvolved personally. His or her world and experience in therapy were separate, and patients’ reactions to the analyst were the subject of “transference interpretations.”

We have already seen that the Gestalt therapy focus on unraveling the present field of experience and exploring the co-created relationship between therapist and client is a fundamentally different approach. However, just as Gestalt therapy has moved on, so has much of the psychoanalytic movement. The work of major psychoanalytic theorists, notably Kohut (1984) and Stolorow and Atwood (1992), has led to a convergence with that of dialogic Gestalt therapists such as Gary Yontef and Lynne Jacobs. The latter, an experienced Gestalt therapist (who, interestingly, has also trained as an analyst), describes a new-shared emphasis. “The perspective of understanding that every phenomenon that happens in the therapeutic encounter is variably co-created by the therapist and patient together, never just by the patient” (Jacobs, 2000b, p. 106), is an idea that has already been referred to as central in field theory thinking.

Yontef (2001) has pointed out that the dialogic perspective

has to do with an emphasis on meeting the patient without aiming. The first principle is inclusion, which is putting yourself so much into the patient’s experience, trying to feel the patient’s experience as intensely as if you could feel it in your own body—without giving up your separate sense of self. [The final] authority on whether the empathic or the inclusion statement is accurate is that the patient tells you whether it is accurate or inaccurate. A principle I have come to is that, if the patient says [to me as a therapist] “you don’t understand,” you don’t. (pp. 86–87)

In other words, in a therapeutic field where there is a shared, mutually constructed relationship, the whole approach of the therapist toward the client becomes critically important. Yontef continued:

A related principle is confirmation. We want not only to accept the person but confirm our sense of his or her existence and potential. . . . If we practice inclusion and confirmation,

it requires a faith that by identifying with the present state of the person, the person can grow. It requires faith in the process. (pp. 87–88)

In an important statement, he added: “You can’t really practice inclusion without being emotionally present. One aspect of presence that we don’t talk a lot about that I think is very powerful is described with words like compassion, kindness, equanimity, humility” (p. 88).

Jacobs (2000b) pointed out that “patients have to develop the confidence [that] as they lose their habitual form, or fixed patterns, as they trip and fall, as they sink into despairing silence, the therapist is still trying to stay in touch with them” (p. 106). This requires that the field of therapy have a

dimension wherein the therapist’s responses are experienced as consolidating, affirming, enhancing of the self-esteem of the patient, lending self-coherence to the patient. The therapist is deeply involved and engaged in . . . the holding, outline-defining, containing function while patients experiment with unfamiliar de-stabilizing ways of organizing their own experience. (p. 106)

The movement in Gestalt therapy, then, was first a greater appreciation of dialogue, the relationship and “the between,” and since then has been a further development to “conversation with attuned, calibrated presence. Therapists now need to learn even more sensitive listening to the patient” (Jacobs, 2000b, p. 107). Her advice is: “Listen from the patient’s perspective what it’s like to be the patient and what it’s like to be in relationship to me the therapist” (p. 107).

A Shift in Paradigm

What we notice, in the thinking of both Yontef and Jacobs, is a fundamental *relational* stance—an emphasis on the mutuality and co-created, co-regulated nature of therapy, where, as therapists, we are part of organizing the mutual reality or shared field and in turn are created and organized by it. As I have written previously (Parlett, 1991):

A provocative idea for therapists follows from the notion of reciprocal influence, namely that change in the client may be achieved by the therapist changing her or himself. Since it is a co-created field, a function of what the therapist brings to it as well as what the client brings, a change in the way a therapist acts or feels towards his/her client and interrelates with him, will affect the mutual field and have consequences for the client. . . . It strongly endorses the view that in the impeccable practice of Gestalt therapy there has to be a central place for continuing supervision, as well as daily attention to our fitness-to-practice. . . . If we are to act congruently and authentically as therapists, we have to acknowledge that the way we are and the way we live cannot be entirely separated from our work as professional Gestalt therapists. Everything in our phenomenal field becomes part of the matrix from which we co-create fields with others. (p. 78)

Robine (2001) also wrote of the way in which patient and therapist become implicated with each other:

When a patient sits in front of me and tells me that he is anxious, I can choose to listen to his words not only as words *in* a certain situation, but also as words *of* the situation, *as if* these words were belonging to an undifferentiated field which has to be explored, instead of to an individual, the one who tells them. The individualist classical position would focus, as I used to do during many years, upon the patient's anxiety: how does he feel it, where does it come from, what does it remind him of, which projections organise it, etc. From this position the therapist comes to consider that he gets a more and more definite knowledge of his patient. . . . Another choice . . . is to look at this anxiety as belonging "first" to the situation. Maybe this anxiety is his response to seeing me? Maybe I am making him anxious? Maybe I am making him anxious as a reaction to my seeing him? Or to our meeting? Maybe "his" anxiety is actually mine? Or may it only be the atmosphere which is being created between us? (pp. 101–102)

The view that therapists can be so implicated in the therapeutic experiences of their patients or clients is a far cry from "the detached expert" view of the therapist. It follows, however, from the wholesale shift in thinking that has been referred to, notably by Wheeler (1997), as a shift from the "individualist" to the "field paradigm."

The term *paradigm shift*, now in wide use, means a revolutionary change in basic assumptions, methods, and outlook that can occur in any area of knowledge and in science marks a major turning point (as, for instance, occurred with the arrival of Einstein's theory of relativity, which overturned the centuries-old Newtonian model of the universe). Major expansions of human understanding rarely occur without some kind of revolution that changes the generally accepted ideas of the day.

As we have seen, within therapy—and more widely in psychology and medicine—ideas of the field represent a revolutionary development in how human beings are seen in relation to each other; hence the acknowledgment that a paradigm shift is under way. Newton, Descartes, and Bacon were influential in promoting a particular view of "scientific objectivity" that grew up in parallel with development of the "machine age." It resulted in human beings' being treated as if they were objects. The tendency to objectify others and subtly to dehumanize them, denying or demeaning their subjective experience, was part of what Gestalt therapy reacted against. With its emphasis on exploring experience through phenomenological inquiry, dialogue, and experiment, Gestalt therapy honored the validity of the individual's unique, subjective experience and valued authenticity, personal responsibility, and the capacity of human beings to question orthodoxy and resist social pressures to conform. It was a humanistic agenda in line with existentialist ideas and constituted a vigorous defense of the individual in the face of "antihuman" trends within society, such as state oppression, mass conformity, and other restrictions on human freedom.

However, as Wheeler (2000) and others have pointed out, the assertive "individualist" emphasis within Gestalt therapy, though it may have been in tune with the spirit of the 1960s and 1970s, seems out of tune now, not only with the present era, but with some of the original key ideas in *Gestalt Therapy* published in 1951. Specifically, Wheeler suggested that Gestalt therapy needs to amplify and reconsider selfhood from a field or relational standpoint—an idea that was present in the founders' ideas but has not been fully worked out since.

Many writers—including Lichtenberg (1994), Polster (1995), Crocker (1999), Wheeler (2000), and Philippson (2001)—have addressed the Gestalt theory of the self, and although there are different emphases and academic-style disputes, there is also a substantial area of

agreement. This is based on the idea, first spelled out in *Gestalt Therapy*, that the self arises in contact and is a “process” and not “a thing”: “Let us call the ‘self’ the system of contacts at any one moment. As such, the self is flexibly various . . . [It] is the contact-boundary at work” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 235). Others have added to this revolutionary idea. As Spagnuolo Lobb (2001a) wrote, the self is “put in neither an intrapsychic nor an environmental position. . . . [I]t acts and is acted upon” (p. 51). Or as Crocker (1999) stated, “The self, as a complex power of the human organism, is an integral element in the environmental situation, and is recurrently responsive to, and active in, the events in the surrounding environment and inside the organism” (pp. 171–172).

“The self is best understood,” wrote Wheeler (2000, pp. 103–104), as a “natural process of unifying the experiential field, the synthesizer or ‘gestalt-maker’ of experience (or better still, the gestalt-making process itself).” The process has even been called “selfing.” Thus Wolfert (2000) wrote that “selfing is an activity, a dynamic relation which is ever-moving, ever-changing—an organization shaped by and shaping experiences in the play of the forces of the field” (p. 77).

Values and Ethics

The implication of *the view of self espoused in Gestalt therapy* is that the self changes as a function of changes in the field as a whole, where “the self is the figure/background process” or “the power that forms the gestalt in the field” (Perls et al., 1994, p. 152). In other words, the self is to be understood as a function of field and as contacting what is “other” in the field. As Wheeler and others have pointed out, this means that human beings are inextricably tied up in other people’s fates and that there is no absolute and sharp cutoff point between the field of self and the field of others. As Lee (2002) pointed out, “If you and I are significant to each other, you are part of my construction of ‘self’ and I am part of your construction of ‘self’” (p. 36).

Affirming as central the intersubjective, co-created, interdependent nature of human existence and experience means that particular ethical, political, or value positions are given support, with implications for therapy priorities. A central interest for Gestalt therapists must be how individuals manage their lives. Specifically, for therapists “what concerns us . . . in this ever-changing field are the ever-changing constellations of the ever-changing individual” (Perls, 1976, p. 25). Addressing this previously, I argued that

[t]he ability to “adjust creatively” is necessary for health and well being in a complex and changing world. Conversely, inability in this realm results in dis-ease (alienation, isolation, etc.). The focus of a more field-based therapy could be on *promoting an active process of learning and practising abilities of creative adjustment*. (Parlett, 2000, p. 20, italics in original)

Moreover, a heightened concern for the “health” of the field itself is called for.

If it is our evolved nature to be whole-field-integrative, relational, and intersubjective . . . and if our full development of that nature is dependent on a healthy field of other healthy selves . . . then it follows that an ethical perspective . . . must be based on the criterion of *which actions, which attitudes most foster that healthy development of the whole*

field. Such a criterion simultaneously aims toward taking care of both “our own interest” and the interest of the whole field. No longer are the two things inherently opposed—self *versus* other. (Wheeler, 2000, pp. 379–380, italics in original)

The same principles lead to a view of professional ethical problems that arise in all forms of therapy, including Gestalt therapy. Lee (2002) explained the need to

[f]ind solutions to ethical problems that serve both the individual and the larger field, ones that lead to and support healthy self/other development. Ideally when these ethics are considered by its members to be part of the ground of the field, such that we all understand that my internal experience is part of your internal experience and yours is part of mine . . . wouldn't there be much less need of an externally enunciated and enforced code of ethics? (p. 47)

Lee may sound idealistic, though he acknowledged that there would still be “conflicts and mistakes.” He went on:

Conflicts and mistakes would be handled with enough support provided by the people involved and the surrounding community, rather than being handled in an individualistically administered process in which participants are seen as adversaries and the name of the game is to discredit, blame, humiliate the other and the most powerful individual or group wins. (p. 48)

A FIELD VIEW OF DEVELOPMENT

Rethinking Gestalt therapy theory from a more “field-influenced” conceptual base has taken writers into areas that earlier Gestalt therapists have written little about. One of these contemporary themes is human development—child, adolescent, adult. In 1993, Yontef observed that “[t]he Gestalt therapy concept of human development is that it is always a function of biological maturation, environmental influences, interaction of the individual and the environment, and creative adjustment by the unique individual” (p. 272).

In other words, development is a function of the whole field. Yet the implications were still not fully explored. Wheeler (1998) expressed many Gestalt therapists’ and researchers’ keenly felt discomfort with standard clinical models of development—all involving “stages” in a process of personal maturation: “With these models the developing child is viewed too much in isolation, as if human development were something purely ‘inner’ or biologically driven” (p. 115).

Gillie (1999) and others have suggested that the seminal research of Daniel Stern (1985) provides a basis for a more specifically Gestalt theory on infant development. Specifically, “Stern draws four key significant conclusions.” *First*, infants “differentiate themselves from the start”—replacing ideas of “fusion with mother” (p. 109). *Second*, “development proceeds through increasingly complex phases [that] do not take the place of their predecessor” (p. 109). *Third*, “infants organize their experience from the beginning” (p. 109)—in other words, they are field sensitive and begin “selfing” from the start. *Fourth*, “the developing ‘sense of self’ is a co-creation between the infant and environment . . . and self-regulation is a function of what happens between the infant and the carer(s)” (p. 109).

Wheeler (1998) expanded on the idea that “*development always and necessarily means the development of a whole field*—not just development in a field or context, but development of that field or context” (p. 117, italics in original). In short,

[t]he environment that is integrated into the child’s evolving self-process must itself evolve over time, in some organized harmony with the biological and experiential growth of the child. . . . [T]he parents that the four-year-old needs are “different parents” from the ones that the infant needed, or that the 20-year-old will need later. Parents themselves have to grow and develop. (p. 117)

McConville (2001b), writing about adolescent development, also explored the question of “what develops?” and again looked to a deeper understanding of “the biological, psychological, and social as dimensions of an integrated field, which Lewin called the *life space*” (p. 30). McConville quoted Yontef (1993): “Using the field approach one thinks of living, moving, changing, energetic interacting. . . . [T]he forces of a field are of a whole and *develop over time*” (p. 301, emphasis added by McConville). McConville concluded, “A field approach to human behavior is by definition an implicit model of development. The child-environment system is in a state of . . . tension of movement or *becoming*” (p. 30). There is an “unfolding (or the interruption of an unfolding) . . . that orients that field in a certain developmental direction” (p. 30).

Writing about the ongoing development of adults, I pointed out that “new conditions foster developmental shifts. Changed circumstances and novel situations require the individual—challenging him or her—to experiment and extend his/her range” (Parlett, 1997, p. 25). In this, I liken the structure of a Gestalt experiment (see, e.g., Zinker, 1977) to the experience of a “change in life circumstances” (like taking a new job, leaving home, giving birth). “Major shifts require a particular kind of calibrated support and challenge in the field, . . . enough accompanying support in the field, linked to a compelling invitation to ‘risk doing something differently’” (p. 25).

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SHAME AS A FIELD EXPERIENCE

“Risks” and “supports” are mentioned frequently in discussions of shame. As a specific topic, condition, and emotion, shame has become much discussed in the last 10 years. Many Gestalt writers have addressed it, including Lee (1995), Yontef (1996), Wheeler (1996), Resnick (1997), and Fuhr and Gremmler-Fuhr (1997). Resnick (1997) summarized points of agreement and of contention. There is agreement, for instance, about (a) much of the reported and described experience of shame—feeling “bad,” “weak,” “worthless,” “acutely embarrassed”; (b) its difference from guilt (about *being* wrong as opposed to *doing* wrong); (c) how “shame of being ashamed” is

BOB: The process of the work that Gordon Wheeler and I engaged in around how shame and belonging regulate the relational field is a prime example of the intersubjective nature of the field. We came to the process from seemingly different tracks, me from my study of and research on shame as well as my belief that Gestalt theory was talking about shame without mentioning it by name, and he from his long-time interest in the nature of “self” process. And we discovered we were in the same place. The atmosphere that existed between Gordon and me led to many, many awarenesses. For

common; (d) how shame is used in social control; and (e) how therapists and many therapy interventions can be inadvertently shaming for the patient.

Wheeler (1997), in collaboration with Robert Lee, made a persuasive case that shame in particular might be best regarded as a field phenomenon:

In personal terms, what parts of myself, what urges and desires, what thoughts and feelings, can be *received and connected within my social environment . . .*? What parts will meet with resonance and energetic response (including at times energetic opposition), and . . . which parts will be met with a pulling away, a disconnect, often in an overtly belittling or punishing form? (pp. 233–234, italics in original)

Shame, he suggested, is the “*affect of that disconnect in the field*” (p. 234, italics in original).

What Wheeler (1997) called the “disconnect in the field” involves an absence of support from, or loss of connection with, others—or worse, acts of hurtful rejection, sarcasm, mockery, or public exposure. But he was at pains to remind us that

the field we are talking about . . . is not just my “environment” . . . in the sense of something “outside myself.” It is also “my world,” in the same sense that my inner world is “mine,” and an “*essential and integral part of my self*.” (p. 234)

This means (as he wrote elsewhere; Wheeler, 1995) that the “disconnect” is “*felt as a break in the cohesion of the self*” (p. 82, italics in original).

Wheeler was seeking here, as elsewhere in his writings, to demonstrate again that the Gestalt view of self—being *in* the field, *part of* the field, and *integrator of* the field, all at the same time—enables a definitive shift away from an intrapsychic position. The experience of shame can be written about as if it were a pathological state of an individual alone, even though shaming arises clearly within relationships and social settings. Thus Kaufman, a psychoanalyst renowned for his writing about shame, wrote, “Shame is felt as an inner torment, as sickness of the soul. It is the most poignant experience of the self by the self. . . . Shame is a wound felt from the inside, dividing us both from ourselves and from one another” (quoted

example, I remember where I was sitting in Gordon’s kitchen when I realized the awareness that shame is “felt as a break in the cohesiveness of the self” and then saying that to Gordon, which enabled him to make a further discovery about the condition of the environmental field that must exist in order for that to occur. The quality of intersubjective support in our field, together, led to a product that could not have resulted from just an individual.

MALCOLM: Yes, this is a great example. Close professional collaborations, like other intense one-to-one relationships, are wonderful models for seeing field phenomena at work. The whole co-regulated, mutually constructed, relational field has distinct qualities; it changes over time; it is different from being the sum of the parts (the two selves); a third entity comes into existence, with a life of its own. Sometimes it becomes difficult to say “who thought what first,” so intertwined and co-created is the field (or third entity) that is formed between people in close relationship who are each affecting the other. Interestingly, you describe an “atmosphere”—that is how people often describe an energetic field that is created.

BOB: And with regard to what you say about people in close relationships, this intersubjective nature of the field, in the context of sufficient safety and caring, is the essence of what we commonly refer to as intimacy.

in Wheeler, 1995, p. 82). The language here is very different and does not carry the sense of human beings located always and inevitably within, and forming part of, a wider relational field, with “self-other” being more the focus of study than the experiences of an individualized self.

Fuhr and Gremmler-Fuhr (1997) pointed out that Robine (1991) also regarded shame from a field perspective. Robine (1991) described shame as a “serious break of confluence with the environmental field. . . . Any major developmental process . . . requires a major break of confluence with our environmental field in some respect” (p. 251). They added that shame “cannot be generally avoided and . . . there is nothing sacred about shame feelings” (p. 252). By this Fuhr and Gremmler-Fuhr appear to have meant that shame feelings are a commonplace part of human experience and are bound to occur—whereas others had implied that they were devastating and to be avoided at all costs. Treating them as “sacred” implies giving them too much solemn attention when they should be treated in a more robust and matter-of-fact way.

Writers, it must be said, differ in their emphasis in writing about shame. Some incline toward a more robust attitude, recognizing the existence and importance of shame reactions and the need to learn to tolerate them. Others tend to draw most attention to the need for exceptional levels of sensitivity when working with issues of shame and the need for high levels of support. The different emphases are indicative of wider theoretical and ideological tensions within the Gestalt community. Faced with study of “an organism/environment field,” some incline to emphasizing the organism’s autonomy, capacity for choice, inner-directedness, and personal responsibility, albeit within the field; others lean more toward emphasizing connection, the need for environmental support, and inevitable relatedness. These tensions exist both within “the field of Gestalt therapy” and within the lives and thinking of many practitioners in this field.

THE “FIELD” AND ITS MYSTERY

It is appropriate to return to the “field of Gestalt therapy” in bringing together final thoughts regarding contemporary theory. Though this account has drawn upon a range of writers and ideas, the actual variation is far wider. I have noted areas of convergence and identified the field perspective as the core of present-day Gestalt therapy theory. Those with good knowledge of today’s professional Gestalt therapy field internationally will have a sense of the complexity of the subdivisions, training allegiances, and ideological fissures that are present in the field generally and that energize parts of the theoretical debate.

In focusing on the concept of the field and the field perspective, I am aware of the degree of selection I have had to exercise. Moreover, I realize that many questions about the field remain unanswered. In particular, are we any closer to understanding the exact nature of “the field”? What is its precise status? Spagnuolo Lobb (2001a) suggested that

BOB: I continue to be in awe of, and surprised by, what I know and am continuing to learn about field phenomena. As you quote from Spagnuolo Lobb, we are reaching for an understanding of what has been ungraspable, particularly from other theoretical perspectives. But the rewards for progressing in this direction are great. The knowledge of field properties and dynamics that I have acquired from a Gestalt relational perspective has made such a difference in how I live my own life as well as how I am able to understand and to be with others. As to the field that we have been co-creating here together with our readers, bringing forward the

the founders of Gestalt therapy tried to make a theory of human nature that does not categorize, or put human behavior into schemas. . . . They tried to grasp the ungraspable, to catch the uncatchable, they tried to make a theory of what is not theorizeable. (p. 50)

Are our ideas of “field” equally elusive?

A particular question eventually becomes unavoidable. Is “the field” ultimately just a metaphor, a useful science-derived concept and framework that can be used to explain what is difficult to explain? Or is “something there” in the form of an explicit energy field in “the space between”? Kepner (2003a), an experienced Gestalt therapist with a strong interest in physical process, described the field as follows:

[T]he energetic field of the therapist, group and environment [is] crucial to support or mitigate certain kinds of experience. This concept is not part of standard Gestalt therapy theory, nor part of our western education, but I have come to understand as essential to understanding how experiential fields are created. (p. 8)

He offered the example of how “some facilitators seem to be able to create a ‘magic’ that is more than the sum of their intellectual knowledge” and how a therapist with a strong and well-developed energy field in a particular frequency literally vibrates the client’s field into more of that frequency, making it easier for the client to access that kind of experience (p. 9).

Roberts (1999a) also argued that the field is not just an imaginary construct. He pointed to the field having its own “laws,” or “orders,” which have been described, for instance, by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner (1986) and other family systems therapists such as Hellinger (see Beaumont, 1998, for a Gestalt-related discussion). Roberts wrote, “The *field as a whole* determines what is needed in any given situation—and implies the appropriate action if we listen to it. By helping the client attend to her experiencing process, we enable her to access the intelligence of the field” (p. 42). He goes on to cite dreams as an example:

If we try to understand the dream as a *field event*—an emergent property of the whole field—we see that it need not be understood exclusively as some kind of “private message” sent from an inner Self. . . . Indigenous cultures everywhere have long considered that dreams harbour messages for the *community*, not the individual. . . . They reflect an order which transcends the shared social reality, and are *not* considered the exclusive property of the dreamer. A field theoretical understanding has more in common with these perspectives on dreaming than with those of most 20th century psychological theories. (pp. 43–44)

diverse history and body of ideas that you have so competently presented, I have enjoyed our interchange, and I find myself curious as to what it will stir in our readers.

MALCOLM: Thanks, Bob, for stirring me. I just hope that the conversation between us gives extra flavor to the interesting and complex issues that always come up when considering field phenomena. Ultimately, like all concepts and theories in Gestalt, ideas about the field need to be chewed and digested, discovered as being relevant to one’s own life and experience. They have to make the transition from words on a page to something lived and embodied, known intimately, and recognized as valid because they ring true for us at a deep level.

Questioning the extreme subjectivist view that there is no field other than the one we construct, other writers (e.g., Parlett, 1991; Robine, 1996) have pointed out that many “mysterious” phenomena well-known to therapists are altogether inexplicable within the usual frameworks of mainstream scientific knowledge. Robine (1996) wrote:

It is well known, at least among psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, that it is no accident that we get certain patients and not others, that they bring up certain themes and not others, and that this happens at certain moments and not others. Whether we call it “coincidence,” “synchronicity,” “communication at an unconscious level,” or “transference/countertransference,” . . . all clinicians experience the same frustration at their limited ability to explain this phenomenon. (p. 15)

No discussion of the field in the specialized and relatively small-scale arena of Gestalt therapy should ignore the general scientific beliefs of the day. However, there is much upheaval and “mystery” in contemporary science. For instance, in the wake of developments in quantum physics and brain research, and using sophisticated computer technology that was not available in the early days of studying “paranormal phenomena” and “extrasensory perception,” extraordinary developments are occurring in these specialist subjects. As never before, there is an increasing focus for legitimate scientific study of these phenomena funded by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and conducted in universities such as Princeton and Stanford by scientists from the mainstream. There are widespread speculations that something like an information-carrying general field exists and that the brain is “holographic” and “analyzes frequencies” of this field (see, e.g., Pribram, 1991; Radin, 1997; Sheldrake, 1995).

It would be ironic if Gestalt therapists were to turn their backs on these developments, suggestive as they are of a forthcoming scientific revolution—and one, if (or when) it comes, that might well confirm Gestalt therapy’s increasing “field emphasis” as inquiry along essential lines. As was the case with our founders in 1951, Gestalt therapists may need courage to be “ahead of their time” in taking present-day ideas of field theory a lot further yet.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. The author, Malcolm Parlett, explains how working in the “here and now” has a broader definition in contemporary Gestalt therapy than merely staying present focused. Define and describe the more sophisticated notion of working in the here-and-now that the addition of a field theory approach has brought to the practice of working from a Gestalt perspective.
2. The therapist’s role in the therapeutic setting has changed over the past hundred years. First, describe the differences noted in the chapter between psychoanalysis and Gestalt therapy. Next, outline and define the roles, responsibilities, and function of the therapist when working from a contemporary Gestalt field approach.
3. Explain why retaining a supervisor is especially important when working with clients from a field theory orientation.

4. What is the definition of the “self” in Gestalt therapy theory, and what is meant by the term *selfing*?
5. What is meant by the notion that shame is a “disconnect” or a “major break of confluence”? Give an example of shame and disconnect or break in confluence.

EXPERIENTIAL PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1: Iron filings and magnets: This is an experiment that many people have done as children. But it is worth doing again to get a visual sense of field phenomena. Place iron filings on a stiff piece of paper and put a magnet under the paper. Notice how the magnet organizes the whole field. Notice what happens when a second magnet is placed under the paper and is moved slowly. Then notice what happens when a third magnet is placed under the paper. (Activity designed by Robert Lee.)

ACTIVITY 2: Drawing with partners: Divide into pairs, with each dyad getting a large piece of paper and some crayons or magic markers. Within the dyads, decide who will go first. Then, without talking, the first person draws something, a line, a figure, anything he or she wishes. After a short time, the first person stops and the second person adds to the drawing in the way he or she wishes. Continue to take turns drawing, without speaking, until both agree, nonverbally, that the drawing is finished. Change partners and repeat this process several times. Have participants talk in small groups as to what stood out to them about the experience. And have them note how their experience of their own participation, what they contributed, and possibly their sense of themselves varied in different dyads. (Activity designed by Robert Lee.)

ACTIVITY 3: The field in which each of us is immersed is not a two-dimensional entity easily depicted on paper. In fact, the field is better represented in three dimensions. However, for the sake of this activity, you are asked to simplify the notion of field by drawing one on paper. First, depict yourself (as a picture, symbolic representation, figure, etc.). Select what you consider to be your primary field (although the fields in which we reside at work, at home, and in organizations may overlap with each other and be embedded in the larger field of the universe, select one for this exercise). Around the picture of yourself, depict the other people, structures, animals, material possessions, experiences, and influences that exemplify the field from your own unique perspective. Next, consider entering into a new therapeutic relationship with a Gestalt therapist. That individual now also becomes a component of your field. As you walk into the therapy office, you carry with you representations, like your drawing, of various fields in your life. As you can see, the therapist has much to learn about you and about being with you in your field.

ACTIVITY 4: The author of this chapter writes about Gestalt therapy as an improvisational activity, quoting Spagnuolo Lobb’s (2003b) description of what Stern (2004) called “now moments,” unique opportunities or once-in-a-lifetime moments that must be seized. To help you get a sense of the potential impact of such turning-point moments in the therapeutic setting, reflect back into your own life and identify one such “now moment” or unique decisional point. In journal format, briefly describe your selected moment, and then generate an outline of the alternative paths not taken. Flesh out each of your alternative paths by writing paragraphs describing how your life could have changed if you had made each of those alternative choices. In the way that your alternative paths could have

changed your life, “now moments” in the therapeutic setting can change the course of the therapeutic moment or the unit of work.

ACTIVITY 5: Your chapter author quotes Roberts (1999a) as stating that dreams are a “field event—an emergent property of the whole field—we see that it need not be understood exclusively as some kind of “private message” sent from an inner Self. . . . Indigenous cultures everywhere have long considered that dreams harbour messages for the *community*, not the individual” (pp. 43–44). In journal format, narrate one of your recently recalled dreams from your perspective as the dreamer. Next, go back and rewrite a description of the dream events as if they have implications for the field in which you reside, the community, or the world. Note any differences in the process of generating the multiple perspectives of your dream and of any awarenesses you experience as a result of considering your dreaming as having potential implications for others than yourself.