Unfinished business: the Zeigarnik effect

In gestalt we believe that human beings have a natural tendency and a need to make meaningful wholes from their experience. Even if the whole is not present, we seek completion (Wertheimer, 1959; Koffka, 1935). The two unfinished diagrams in Figures 1.6 and 1.7 illustrate our need for completion. The series of dots in Figure 1.6 will be perceived as a complete circle, the unfinished ‘3’ in Figure 1.7 will be completed. It is a human need to complete to make sense of our world.

The gestalt concept of unfinished business is concerned with our need to complete the uncompleted. Misattributing ideas concerning unfinished business to himself rather than the original work by Bluma Zeigarnik, Fritz Perls said that our life is basically nothing but an infinite number of unfinished situations, or incomplete

Figure 1.6

Figure 1.7
gestalts (F. Perls, 1969). As soon as one task or situation is completed another arises. These incomplete gestalts will range from the relatively trivial such as mounting housework, to major life events such as an on-going grieving process. It may not be possible or may be inappropriate to complete some unfinished business in the actual situation. However, if we fail to find some form of resolution we can become cluttered with these unresolved situations that then seek expression through psychological distress and physical illness. Patterns where completion is avoided result in the forming of fixed gestalts where awareness is blocked, satisfaction dampened, withdrawal avoided, impulses turned inwards and the possibility of allowing oneself psychological space is denied. Such processes can then become habitual particularly when supported culturally.

Unfinished business is also known as the Zeigarnik effect, named after Bluma Zeigarnik, a Russian gestalt psychologist who studied the effects of incomplete tasks on individuals. Through her research she discovered that unfinished business resulted in tension that in turn tends to motivate us towards completion. Her research showed that incomplete tasks take up more psychological space than completed tasks. She discovered that waiters with incomplete orders would readily recall those orders whereas as soon as the orders were completed they were forgotten. However, it was in her personal life that she gained a profound and fully embodied sense of the effects of unfinished business. In the following account I am grateful to the work of Elena Mazur (1996).

Zeigarnik suffered several traumas and unfinished situations in her life, including one major trauma that triggered what might be described as a neurosis. In 1931, Zeigarnik’s husband was arrested, leaving her alone with her two children. She never saw him again – he was missing presumed dead. Zeigarnik found it increasingly difficult to live in the family home, a dacha just outside Moscow, being surrounded by memories of her husband and his arrest. So, in order to avoid her increasing distress, she moved to live in Moscow itself. Rather than improving her distress and anxiety this continued to grow. She avoided visiting places that she associated with her husband and this anxiety-based avoidance continued to increase to a point where she developed a form of agoraphobia. Her world continued to shrink until she decided to

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return to the dacha where she had lived with her husband and from where he had been abducted. Having returned she began to visit places around Moscow that held emotive memories of their relationship. The more she exposed herself to these situations the more her symptoms subsided. She had courageously and creatively discovered a way of achieving closure and finishing the unfinished. It is a key task for the gestalt therapist to facilitate clients to do likewise.