Integrating Multicultural Perspectives in Gestalt Therapy Theory and Practice

by Barbara Y. Thomas

Over the past several years I have become increasingly interested in the development of counseling/psychotherapy curriculum which incorporates a more multicultural perspective. As I have continued to learn and teach about Gestalt Therapy, I am in a continuous process of looking for bridges, for areas of potential integration between Gestalt Therapy theory and the area broadly defined as multicultural education.

As I have been involved in this process I have become increasingly convinced that Gestalt Therapy is in a unique position to contribute to and be enriched by the integration of multicultural perspectives. There are, in fact, many aspects of Gestalt Therapy which have the potential to support an articulation of multiculturalism.

In this article I would like to briefly articulate a few of the connections that I have begun to make in my reading of multicultural theory and Gestalt Therapy. My hope is to support awareness of these issues as part of our collective consciousness.

FIGURE AND GROUND

The figure/ground concept provides a unique and relevant tool for conceptualizing issues of culture. Many of the themes and issues which are raised in relation to intercultural contact and inter-group relations operate in terms of figure/ground phenomena. As we know so well, figure is that which stands out and demands attention. Ground, on the other hand is that which provides context.

Ground is so much the “given,” that it is usually not noticed. Figure is what we take for granted. The implications of this concept for issues of culture, diversity and power are vast.

The fact that culture is itself invisible to those who are immersed in it is a prime example of the operation of figure/ground. This reality is articulated beautifully in the book Ishmael, by Daniel Quinn. In the following passage, the teacher Ishmael tells his student:

“I’m telling you this because the people of your culture are...the captives of a story....You mean you’ve never heard of it?....That’s because there’s no need to hear of it. There’s no need to name it or discuss it. Every one of you knows it by heart by the time you’re six or seven. And you hear it incessantly, because every medium of propaganda, every medium of education pours it out incessantly. And hearing it incessantly, you don’t listen to it. There’s no need to listen to it. It’s always there humming in the background, so there’s no need to attend to it at all. In fact, you’ll find—at least initially—that it’s hard to attend to it. Its’ like the humming of a distant motor that never stops; it becomes a sound that’s no longer heard at all. (Quinn, 1992, p. 35).

Issues of privilege, such as White-, male- and heterosexual-privilege are often difficult to intervene and work with for the very reason that they are so invisible to those persons to whom those privileges are granted. In her article “White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh writes:

As a White person, I realized I had been taught about racism as some-

thing which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think Whites are carefully taught not to recognize White privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in a tutored way to ask what it is like to have White privilege. I have come to see White privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in on each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. (McIntosh, 1994, p. 12)

We see the operation of figure/ground processes in what Sampson (1993) has termed the “absent standard.” The hidden, implicit and apparently “absent” nature of ground often creates the illusion that we are describing a person, system, or culture’s “actual characteristics as though they possessed in themselves what is in fact an outcome of a comparative process made against an absent standard.” (Sampson, 1993, p.1224).

...heterosexuality becomes the implicit standard for judging homose-

xuality; White American, the standard by which African Americans are judged; Western society, the implicit standard by which non westerners are understood. In each case, the standard is implicit and unmarked, even though

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it is the basis on which the description itself is made. To adopt the heterosexual
standard, or the Western pattern of child rearing, or the White male socialization
story as the implicit norm and then to measure everything against this norm while loudly proclaiming neutral-
ity and impartiality in ones' descriptions is to forget the relational judg-
ments that are necessarily implicated in making any description in the first
place. It is also to fail to see the power that permits one standard to become
the only standard by which the world and persons' experiences of it are
evaluated... The argument then is not simply that our descriptions are eva-
luative judgments, but that the implicit standard by which such judg-
ments are made is the outcome of power and serves to maintain that
power. (Sampson, 1993, p. 1225).

In a similar vein, Rosabeth Kanter, based on her research on women in
organizations, has written on the subject of "tokens," those persons who are
members of under represented groups in
organizations and groups. She describes
ways in which tokens "capture a dispro-
portionate awareness share." This height-
ened visibility creates a set of perfor-
manee pressures the result of which is that
tokens must perform under conditions
different from those of dominants.

Phenomena such as the invisibil-
ity of culture and privilege, the operation of the "absent standard" and the height-
ened visibility of tokens provide excellent
examples for teaching the concept of figure/
ground. Likewise much that we know
about figure/ground phenomena can be
useful in providing an experiential and
conceptual model for moving to discus-
sions of these issues. The examination
and articulation of the ways in which the
relative fluidity of figure and ground is
related to issues and dynamics of power
would be a significant extension of
Gestalt Therapy theory.

Cultural/Racial Identity
Development and Contact Styles

Identity can be understood as a
dynamic organization of perceptions,
affects, cognitions, and behaviors related
to the boundary which defines the self/
environment, or self/other relationship.

The process of identity develop-
ment is particularly challenging for
members of oppressed groups. Through
interaction with the social environment,
the individual internalizes images of self
and other.

Oftentimes, a person who is a
member of a minority group may find
herself or himself interacting with a larger
culture which devalues, denies, and
targets her or him as being different. The
person may experience being unwittingly
feared or despised based on others' res-
ponses to his or her culture, race,
religion, appearance, or sexual orientation.
These beliefs and messages from the
larger culture, in addition to direct experi-
ences of discrimination and abuse, often
affect one's sense of self. The concept of
internalized oppression has been used to
refer to processes by which these external
beliefs and messages are introjected
and become part of the internalized
representations of the self. (Hertzberg,

The process of recovering from
or overcoming the results of internalized
oppression is what is described in models
of racial or cultural identity development.

The early attempts to define a process of
cultural/racial identity development were
created by Black writers attempting to
describe the racial identity development of
African Americans. The most highly
developed models of Black identity devel-
oped were those of Cross (1970, 1971)
and Jackson (1978). Subsequently similar
models were developed to describe homo-
sexual identity development (Cass, 1979),
feminist identity development (Downey
and Roush, 1985), as well as models for
other oppressed groups (see Myers et. al.,
1991) A more general Minority Identity
Development Model has been developed

Janet Helms (1984) proposed a
model of White racial identity develop-
ment. This model suggests a process in
which the White person progresses
through a series of stages differing in the
extent to which he or she acknowledges
racism and learns to accept Whiteness as
an important part of herself or himself.
(Helms, 1990).

The process of racial and cultural
identity development occurs in a highly
charged social-cultural field in which
complex strategies are needed to negotiate
self/other boundary. Gestalt Therapy
notions of contact boundary and contact
style provide a potentially useful frame-
work for describing processes involved in
both the development and expression of
racial and cultural identity. As is true for
other aspects of identity, racial/cultural
identity is based on habitual patterns of
making contact (Berggren, 1986). Philip
Lichtenberg (1990), in his book Undoing
the Clinch of Oppression has made an
important contribution through his effort
to describe key processes which
contribute to "the installation of those
personal styles and practices that are
associated with the establishment and
maintenance of oppressive social rela-
tions" (p. 6). Drawing on Gestalt Therapy
notions of contact/resistance, he provides
an analysis of processes of projection
("projection upon a primed vulnerable
other") and introjection ("identification
with the aggressor") in an attempt to
examine "basic adaptations to relations of
dominance on the side of the oppressor as
well as the oppressed" (Lichtenberg,
1990, p. 8).

Theory and research on racial
and cultural identity can also be a valuable
resource which can serve to inform Gestalt
perspectives on processes of contact and
interaction. For example, the work of
Helms (1990) and Carter (1990, 1995)
suggests that stages of racial conscious-
ness can be an important influence in
dyadic interaction. Focusing on the
counselor-client dyad, Carter states:

...one's stage of racial
identity, regardless of whether one is
Black or White, counselor or client,
may have a stronger impact on the
therapy processes than race per se. That
is, products...resulting from one's
racial world view may influence how
counseling participants perceive and
interact with each other. Different
combinations of stages should result in
different styles of interactions. (Carter,

Extensions of this model could
be created by using a Gestalt Therapy lens
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to examine intrapersonal, interpersonal and dyadic aspects of contact and resistance in interactions between people at different stages of racial consciousness.

**Exploring Theme in Cultural Context**

One of the difficult issues being confronted in the field of cross-cultural counseling and psychotherapy concerns questions regarding the appropriate use of “cultural knowledge” in the work of clinical practitioners. Early writings in the field of counseling culturally different clients focused on providing information on the cultures of different groups.

It is clearly a disadvantage to have no knowledge of a client’s culture. However, to have such knowledge may lead to difficulties as a result of overgeneralization and misuse of information. Information about particular cultures often neglects a full exploration of individual differences among members of that cultural, racial or ethnic group. Sue and Zane (1987) suggest that there is a dubious link between cultural knowledge and effective psychotherapy with racial and ethnic group members and conclude that cultural knowledge is not enough. They correctly point out that the information does not necessarily lead to clear prescriptions for psychotherapy process, especially in light of the large within group differences among members of cultural groups.

Development of theme is an important component of Gestalt Therapy process. Within this context, knowledge of other cultures, subcultures, ethnic and social groups can be conceptualized as material which increases our sensitivity to themes which may arise in our work with clients. By enlarging our ground we gain access to possible themes which otherwise would not easily become final for the therapist who does not share the cultural background of the client.

Belzunce and Gutierrez have developed a model for looking at increasingly larger and more complex contextual arenas in their Ground Sequence (GS) Model. Here they look at figure/ground through several time sequences, extending from observable here and now behavior through time frames including generational patterns and cultural/social/ecological/political events and forces. (Gutierrez, L. 1996).

The model is an important contribution to our way of working and demonstrates how all levels of ground are present in some way with each person/system. The original notion of Gestalt Therapy of working in the present was not based on an assumption that the past (or future) is irrelevant, but on the notion that because ground is ever-present, it is expressed in the moment. And the present moment provides access to that ground. This earlier approach failed to recognize the impact of shared and/or unshared ground in the process of arriving at figures in the present. Persons from the same culture or ethnic background have many aspects of shared ground, including much common history, cultural values, life experiences, and structural relationships to the larger society (e.g. economic, social and political realities). As we work cross-culturally, as well as with persons who are similar to us culturally and socially, themes and potential themes which grow out of the client’s ground of experience and consciousness may not easily become final for the therapist. This may be due, in part, to a lack of access, understanding or appreciation of the experiential and cultural ground of the other person.

Gestalt therapists have emphasized the importance of the rich perceptual mass in order to provide sufficient ground to allow the intervener to join in the exploration of images and metaphors which provide resonance for the client. Effective psychotherapy requires that intervener and client find common language with which to facilitate the client’s articulation of experience. The process is supported by the intervener’s familiarity with contextual factors which influence the client’s experience. We often express the value to the therapist of exposure to literature, theater, music and the visual arts. Rarely do we discuss the ways in which we suffer when our knowledge of the arts remains contained by the boundaries of our own culture.

In an attempt to address the need for contact with expanded cultural contexts and ground, I did an experiment for the class of the Summer Intensive Program (1995). I used a video tape of Toni Morrison talking about her Nobel prize winning novel, *Beloved*. In the video, the author describes this novel as an attempt to portray the experience of slavery from the perspective of the slave, something that she notes is absent in most writing about slavery. After viewing the tape, students were asked to identify aspects of ground and/or themes that became evident to them through that experience. This was a powerful experience for students and faculty alike. It proved to be an effective means of introducing and exploring the notion of contextual ground as well as providing access to an important element of African American experience and history.

Literature can be a particularly useful tool for accessing realities and perspectives which are outside of our immediate experience. The work of great writers possesses a power and complexity which can touch and inform us on so many different levels. Literature, as well as other art forms, offers a reflection of our work as therapists in its invitation to participate at levels of both content and process. An example, drawn from Morrison’s comments on her own work, demonstrates this richness. Describing the opening of *Beloved* Morrison writes:

The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stoke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel’s population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense. No lobby, no door, no entrance — a gangplank, perhaps (but a very short one). And the house into which this snatching — this kidnapping — propels one, changes from spitful to loud to quiet, as the sounds of the body of the ship itself may have changed. (Morrison, 1989, cited in Smith, 1993, p. 349)

In advocating for a knowledge and appreciation of history, art and literature as part of the rich ground which the Gestalt practitioner brings to her work, it is imperative that we not overlook the

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importance of extending that knowledge and appreciation beyond convenient ethnocentric boundaries. Only through the development of our apperceptive mass in an expanded cultural context, can we be truly receptive and responsive to the themes that emerge in work with clients from a range of cultural backgrounds and contexts. As we do more and more of this work we will begin to operate from a place where Gestalt Therapy, through its articulation of the use of theme, can provide a key connecting pin between knowledge of culture, and the practice of psychotherapy.

Challenges to Gestalt Therapy

Theory and Practice

In recent years there has been increasing acknowledgment of the tension, in Gestalt Therapy theory, between its field theory orientation, which stresses the impossibility of separating the individual and environment/context, and a tendency, rooted in a Western value orientation, to emphasize individual phenomenology and autonomy (e.g. Ciornai, 1995; Frew, 1992; Wheeler, 1991; Yontef, 1992). Most critics agree that the individualistic focus has been the dominant force, at least in Gestalt Therapy as it is taught and practiced in the United States.

Jon Frew (1992) in an article entitled “From the Perspective of the Environment” states that “Gestalt therapy attempts to avoid the dichotomy—central to other psychotherapy approaches—which separates the individual from the environment...unfortunately, despite undeniably good intentions, the literature of Gestalt therapy often lapses into descriptive material which promotes the reader and student to think solely in individualistic terms” (Gary Yontef 1992, p 39).

Given the existence of theoretical foundations which easily support an appreciation of context, including social and cultural forces, it is curious that this aspect of our theory and practice continues to be underdeveloped. By maintaining a narrow, individualistic focus, we create an approach which is compatible with the dominant perspectives of Western culture, but fails to provide a sufficient foundation for working in a multicultural context, and for addressing issues of oppression and privilege. Such an approach allows important social and cultural phenomena to remain unacknowledged, unnamed and invisible and tends to privilege a cultural perspective which posits the individual as encapsulated and autonomous.

The comments of Laura Brown with respect to feminist therapy are equally instructive for those who aspire to the development of a holistic, contextualized Gestalt Therapy.

While therapy may, and in many cases must, attend for a time to the specific and sometimes emergent individual details of a client’s life, therapy fails...when the therapist does not draw for herself and for her client, the linkages between the client’s unique experience and the shared realities of others that are shaped by social and political forces. (Brown, 1994, p. 37).

Brazilian Gestalt psychotherapist Selma Ciornai, in her article “The Importance of the Background in Gestalt Therapy,” summarizes clearly the challenge that stands before us in the development of a truly contextualized and holistic Gestalt Therapy. She states that:

...important aspects of people’s lives such as their ethnic, sociocultural, and family background, as well as some deeper internal emotional universes, have stayed literally in the background and out of focus in the practice of Gestalt therapists. In Gestalt words, they have usually not emerged clearly as figures of our client’s processes in therapy, and of the therapists’ attention. I maintain that attention to these aspects is of utmost importance if we aim to really have a holistic understanding and appreciation of people’s processes in life. (Ciornai, 1995, p. 10)

Challenges in the Development of Multicultural Education

The systematic integration of a holistic Gestalt Therapy theory and multicultural perspectives could lead to important contributions both to Gestalt Therapy and to the multicultural movement. The ideas presented in this discussion represent only a small sample of potential areas of cross-fertilization of multiculturalism and Gestalt Therapy. Given that one of the strengths of the Gestalt approach is the use of lively and innovative methods of teaching complex theory, I believe that Gestalt methodology has a potentially important role to play in the development and teaching of multicultural perspectives; and that the theory and practice of Gestalt methodology would be greatly enriched by taking up this challenge.

References


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