

GESTALT THEORY AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Some Early Applications of Gestalt Theory to Clinical Psychology and Psychopathology¹

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More than a half century ago, Solomon ASCH (1946, p. 81) wrote that Gestalt theory had "penetrated into nearly every region of psychological inquiry and has left a permanent impress on the minds of psychologists and on their daily work." To be sure, Gestalt theory was grounded primarily in the study of cognition, thinking, learning, and perception, but it was soon recognized that the fundamental tenets of the theory are relevant for many other domains, including psychopathology.

Although trained as an experimental psychologist, Max WERTHEIMER, a founder of the Gestalt school, held various appointments at psychiatric clinics and physiological and neurological institutes in Prague, Vienna, Berlin and Frankfurt in the early years of the twentieth century. Some of his efforts during this period were devoted to the study of psychological deficits, in detailed individual experiments on brain-injured patients suffering from alexia. During his career, Wertheimer never did explicitly publish on problems in clinical psychology. But he encouraged the clinical work of several students, including Heinrich SCHULTE (1923), Erwin LEVY (1943) and Abraham MASLOW (1971). He also supervised the work of another student, Werner WOLFF (1943), in a study of the dynamics of personality. And he interacted personally or actively corresponded with such prominent American and European psychiatrists and psychopathologists as Ludwig BINSWANGER, Karen HORNEY, Carl JUNG, Erika OPPENHEIMER-FROMM, and David RAPAPORT. The Gestalt approach was widely used in psychopathology and psychotherapy, but not always in a direct way.

The Gestalt therapy of Fritz PERLS has generated extensive attention within the clinical community. PERLS claimed that parallels exist between classical Gestalt

¹ Based on a paper presented orally at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association in New York on August 11, 1995.

theory and his Gestalt therapy (PERLS 1947/1969, 1969; PERLS 1992; ROSENFELD 1978). A number of other figures identified with Gestalt therapy - GORDON (1987), HUMPHREY (1986), SHERRILL (1986), STEWART (1974) - have also argued that some meaningful similarity exists between these two approaches - but they actually are radically different.

Unfortunately, many psychologists continue to identify Gestalt theory with PERLS's Gestalt therapy, despite extensive and convincing evidence by Mary HENLE (1978) that the two approaches have little, if anything, in common. Indeed, PERLS's approach has essentially nothing to do with the work of the Berlin Gestalt psychologists; as Rudolf ARNHEIM, one of the descendants of the Gestalt school, wrote in 1974 (p. 570), "I can see Max WERTHEIMER fly into one of his magnificent rages, had he lived to see one of the more influential tracts of the therapeutic group in question dedicated to him as though he were the father of it all."

Although most historians of psychology recognize that PERLS's Gestalt therapy bears no intellectual resemblance to the Gestalt theory of Max WERTHEIMER, Wolfgang KÖHLER and Kurt KOFFKA, it is not common knowledge that long ago several German and American psychologists and psychiatrists applied the ideas of Gestalt psychology to psychopathology. Quite aside from Fritz PERLS, many clinicians recognized the value of the Gestalt perspective in that domain. During the 1920s through the middle of the twentieth century, articles appeared in the German and American literature that attempted to use Gestalt theory in psychiatry, neurology and clinical psychology. Gestalt theory was also applied during the 1940s to child pathology, speech disability, shock therapy and the analysis of criminal behavior (KISKER & KNOX 1943; VOELKER 1942; WERNER & STRAUSS 1940).

What follows will be a sampling of the ideas of some of the less well known early applications of Gestalt theory to psychopathology. The work of these early scholars was much more closely aligned with, and far more directly informed by, classical Gestalt theory than the later "Gestalt therapy" of PERLS.

A social/situational Gestalt model of psychopathology

Like most other models of abnormal psychology, the Gestalt perspective proposed a combined organic and functional explanation for deviant behavior; psychopathology was viewed as an isomorphic organic and functional disturbance within the individual. Isomorphism in this domain means that underlying neurological processes in the brain are reflected in perception and in behavior. Changes in the brain are viewed as intimately related to external behavioral pathology, but the reverse is also true. Social or situational deficits, as part of the etiology of psychopathological behavior, must also have brain correlates. This perspective is different from a traditional piecemeal diagnosis of psychopathology via sympto-

matology, in which the diagnostician lists symptoms but may disregard either the social/situational context of the individual's life or organic factors as possible contributors to deviant behavior. The Gestalt perspective on psychopathology favors in-depth examination of how individuals view their own place, role and function in a situational social whole, as well as of organic correlates of deviant behavior and ideation.

In 1923, Heinrich SCHULTE published an article on a Gestalt theory of *paranoia* that presented a truly Gestalt view of this form of psychopathology. Although SCHULTE is listed as the sole author of the publication, Erwin LEVY in 1986 claimed that SCHULTE approached WERTHEIMER at a psychology conference in Leipzig and asked his mentor for help, whereupon WERTHEIMER dictated the paper to SCHULTE. According to LEVY (1986, p. 248), such episodes were not unusual: "much of the work out of the Berlin and Frankfurt psychological institutes was inspired and closely supervised by [WERTHEIMER] but published under his students' names. As long as the work was done, recorded authorship was of secondary importance." LEVY suggests, consequently, that the main idea in the work be referred to as the WERTHEIMER-SCHULTE Hypothesis.

This perspective views a human not only as an individual but also as a "We-being"; people are considered to be both a whole in their own right and integral parts of groups to which they belong. Paranoia is a result of a lack of interconnectedness within a social system. WERTHEIMER and SCHULTE viewed the paranoid individual as unable to be a meaningful part of a larger social unit or Gestalt, i. e., a *we-part*. LEVY (1986, p. 248) commented, that "The authors' view implies a dual aspect of people's nature as not only [an individual] but also as a We-Being: [people are] essentially both a whole in [their] own right and part of encompassing groups."

In a recent paper, Lee and Robbins (1995), working in the ego psychology tradition of Heinz KOHUT, essentially repeat the WERTHEIMER-SCHULTE idea in their reference to needs of "belongingness." These needs are identical to we-needs—but neither they nor KOHUT cite the SCHULTE paper (R. M. Lee, personal communication, June 12, 1995). Lee and Robbins (1995, p. 232) suggest that the idea of "we-being" can be broken down into several components, specifically that "belongingness is composed of three aspects: companionship, affiliation, and connectedness," and they devised tests to measure these components.

The WERTHEIMER-SCHULTE (1923) paper proposed, that in group situations an individual's "actions are such as to aim at interlocking in the common situation" (LEVY, 1986, p. 232) and also that "very few people can lead a vigorous life for any length of time without a realized we" (p. 244). Consistent with the WERTHEIMER-SCHULTE position, Lee and Robbins (1995, p. 232) assert, that "People seek to confirm a subjective sense of belongingness or 'being a part of' in order to avoid feelings of loneliness or isolation." An interconnection with a larger

common social situation is essential for the individual to maintain a healthy life. When an individual is not included as a we-part, the person becomes distressed, and this distress, in turn, can produce a state WERTHEIMER and SCHULTE called *we-crippledness*.

We-crippledness is a state which arises out of pressure from external situations (relationship difficulty, stressful living arrangements) or internal situations (psycho-genic or somatogenic dysfunctions) in which individuals may not be able to meet the demands of the social situation confronting them, and hence become effectively "we-insufficient" (LEVY, 1986, p. 235). This tension generates an inner gap or *chasm*. To fill this chasm the individual is forced to shift from thinking about *being among the others* to *being beside the others* (p. 233). LEE and ROBBINS (1995, p. 233) express what is basically the same idea: "A person struggling to feel connected begins to feel different and distant from other people. [The person] may find it hard to accept social roles and responsibilities, leading the person into greater isolation." In both articles, this shift is viewed as a major step towards psychopathological functioning.

This reorganization radically changes the individual's place, role and function within the social/situational Gestalt. Through this recentering of identity from being *among* to being *beside* the others, there now "emerges a genuine I-opposite the others" (LEVY 1986, p. 233). This change, from we-insufficient to I-opposite the others, then encourages individuals to reorganize their painful, insufficient life into a false but livable situation within which the individual is a fully functioning but separated part of a social whole. The disturbed individual engages in a re-interpretation process which continually confirms this surrogate we-crippled structure. Paranoid individuals reorganize their world by replacing their empty we-self with a self in which they are "the center of the behavioral field." The LEE and ROBBINS version of this idea (1995, p. 233) is that "[Persons] may begin to fantasize about finding a place where [they belong], rejecting more realistic roles and relationships." In WERTHEIMER and SCHULTE's conception (LEVY 1986, p. 234), with this surrogate equilibrium in place there is an absence of the chasm that was felt earlier by the individual. With this change of centering from an insufficient we-crippled self to a sufficient I-alongside-the-others, the paranoid has changed from a healthy individual in distress to a distressed individual removed from healthy functioning.

WERTHEIMER and SCHULTE point out that the need for integration into a we-part for one individual may not be equally poignant for another individual. They suggest that individual characteristics and intelligence can be used as indicators of how and when an individual will need to be included as a we-part (LEVY 1986, p. 232). In an attempt to distinguish between those persons who will and those who *will not* have a strong need to be included as a we-part, WERTHEIMER and

SCHULTE propose that people who are "energetic, self assured, strong willed" will have less intense "we-needs" (p. 232).

WERTHEIMER and SCHULTE argue against making a sharp distinction between psychologically and somatically determined phenomena, because of the interrelatedness of such processes. LEVY (1986, p. 248) holds that this is an integral aspect of the theory, because "the WERTHEIMER-SCHULTE hypothesis claims to account for all forms of paranoid developments, regardless of whether they are exogenous or endogenous, psychogenic or somatogenic, and so offers a general theory which at present we do not seem to have."

In addition to his commentary on, and translation of the WERTHEIMER-SCHULTE work, LEVY also contributed a personal/situational theory of *schizophrenia* many years earlier. In 1943 he asserted that most approaches to thinking about schizophrenia are far too associationistic and atomistic. According to LEVY (1943, p. 55), such an approach to pathology does violence to the organized structures which underlie thought processes. LEVY (1943, p. 60) argued, that "Investigators of the formal disturbance of thought have usually undertaken the analysis of their patients' productions by working with the statements piecemeal, in isolation, without regard to the surrounding and determining field constellation." He pointed out, that the thought processes which are observed in the schizophrenic individual often do not follow the Gestalt organizational principle of good continuation, nor do they fit well with the requirements of a present situation. LEVY (1943, p. 66) did not dismiss schizophrenic behavior as simply an outburst of abnormality, but rather described such actions as characteristic of an individual who lives in a false social reality (a "situational field," as LEVY calls it) of which the observer is unaware.

LEVY (1943, p. 55) commented, that occasionally schizophrenics' odd responses to ordinary questions that do not appear to fit with the structural requirements of the question and answer system, either with regard to identity of the topic, or with regard to good continuation, may contain important information that can reveal the schizophrenic's perceived situational field. In analyzing the schizophrenic's response the diagnostician must look beyond the piecemeal analysis of its content. A clinician must probe into the situational field of the schizophrenic to comprehend the schizophrenic's reality fully. Such probing may help provide insight into how and why certain situationally-based perceptions have come to dominate the schizophrenic's life.

Why then does a separation between the reality of a situation and the perceptions of a schizophrenic exist in the first place? According to LEVY (1943, p. 66), "Gestalt theory maintains that thinking is no isolated process but is concretely determined by the whole relation of a person to that person's behavioral world." With this Gestalt perspective on thinking, LEVY traces the cause of the schizophrenic disturbance to difficulties in adjusting to changes in the structure of

the individual's life. Throughout life there are times when individuals must radically alter their orientation to the world. When "the previous view of life, the world, one's self, becomes untenable" (LEVY 1943, p. 66), a change in perceptions and beliefs is necessary; this can be due to external or internal situational demands. In reference to the etiology of schizophrenia, LEVY (1943 p. 67) suggests, that "Clinically one frequently gains the impression that in the very beginning of an early schizophrenic process, patients have reached a stage in their development where they are inescapably confronted with some such far-reaching psychological job." This "psychological job" necessitates that individuals process difficult real-life changes in which high levels of tension may arise. The inability to cope with such tension causes the individual to shift from healthy to psychopathological functioning.

LEVY (1943, p. 67) agreed with WERTHEIMER and SCHULTE about some of the characterological predictors of schizophrenia: "there may be a lack of necessary intelligence, talent and versatility with which to discover the concrete possibilities of recentering and fitting in the facts and problems of life in the required direction." What ensues are idiosyncratic interpretations of the behavioral or situational field which "one so frequently experiences when observing schizophrenic behavior and thinking" (LEVY 1943, p. 67).

Holistic models of psychopathology inspired by Gestalt psychology

Although these contributions by WERTHEIMER, SCHULTE and LEVY provide a classic Gestalt perspective on paranoia and on schizophrenia, other holistic models of psychopathology emerged, that were also clearly inspired by Gestalt psychology. Kurt GOLDSTEIN, an early associate of WERTHEIMER, constructed an organismic theory based on a holistic biological model of personality. Together with Adhémar Gelb (1920), GOLDSTEIN developed a broad-based holistic approach to the studies of brain injuries in soldiers during the first World War, including the use of explicit Gestalt patterns in experiments with patients. GOLDSTEIN later, in 1939, loosely borrowed from the Gestalt school in analyzing the interaction between the whole organism and the environment.

About the same time, Hungarian-American psychiatrist Andras ANGYAL (1939, 1941) used an organismic perspective in discussing what he called "biospheres," holistic systems that include individuals and their environments. While his concepts were somewhat different from those of Gestalt theory, he did attempt to examine personality integration within a Gestalt-like perspective on the structure of wholes. Consistent with his "systems" approach to the study of wholes, ANGYAL (1939, p. 34) wrote, that "The system cannot be derived from the parts; the system is, so to say, an independent framework in which the parts are placed." ANGYAL's concepts, like GOLDSTEIN's, were somewhat similar to those of Gestalt theory.

In 1942, KISKER and KNOX, in an article on Gestalt dynamics and psychopathology, also advanced the idea, that physiological and mental processes are a unitary system governed by similar laws, a position related to the classic Gestalt idea of isomorphism. And the renowned psychiatrist William Alanson WHITE in 1932 conceived the organism as a unity, in which any inadequacies of the individual as a whole, whether biogenic or psychogenic, could become manifest at the psychological level as abnormal mental states. In yet another related conception, Hans SYZ in 1939 described the interwoven network of mind, body and environment and its impact on the total organism. For him, behavioral abnormalities are not isolated in an individual, but are the components of an interactive structure that includes the individual and the society. Individuals are structurally and dynamically such integrated parts of the surrounding social and cultural patterns, that an individual's emotional and behavioral processes are, in effect, a reflection of the society.

Gestalt principles and psychoanalysis

There were also even some early efforts to apply Gestalt principles to psychoanalysis. However, these were severely hampered by the animosity between the two schools. The Gestalt psychologists had many reservations, even a revulsion, about what they considered the "piecemeal" procedure, the excessively atomistic approach, and especially the pessimistic view of human nature offered by psychoanalysis. Although the classical Gestalt theorists dismissed psychoanalysis as associationistic, unscientific, and, yes, repulsive, several theorists did try to link psychoanalysis and Gestalt theory. BERNFELD and BASH, both writing in German, were among several who struggled to establish such links.

BERNFELD (1934) proposed applying Gestalt principles to the study of affect and drive within the psychoanalytic theory. But his 1934 article, "Die Gestalttheorie," focused primarily on the contrast between the two schools, pointing out FREUD's lack of interest in perception and the general apathy of the Gestalt theorists toward psychoanalytic theory. Although BERNFELD suggested that the principle of Gestalt wholes might be useful in understanding affect and drive, it is apparent from his article that each school generally lacked an adequate understanding of the other.

BASH, in his 1946 article, "Gestalt, Symbol und Archetypus," argued that Gestalt theory sheds light on JUNG's concepts of persona, ego, complexes, and archetypes, all of which have a Gestalt character. That is, they are wholes the characteristics of which are not determined by their individual elements, but rather characteristics of their parts are determined by the nature of the whole. BASH suggested that this mode of thinking may help in understanding JUNG's complex system. Such Gestalt properties had already been hinted at in JUNG's reference to the dynamic qualities

inherent in symbolic archetypal formations. According to JUNG, an archetypal image is not a conglomerate, but rather "a homogeneous product with a meaning of its own" (JUNG 1921/1971, p. 442). The terminology may be different, but JUNG seems at least distantly to echo the basic Gestalt idea.

In some ways similar to BERNFELD's and BASH's papers is a 1932 article titled, "A Gestalt approach to the concept of the unconscious," in which Kali PROSAD claimed, that a Freudian notion of intra-psychic conflict is consistent with the Gestalt conception of consciousness as a dynamic unity. The conscious state, according to Prosad (1932, p. 232), is a whole and not simply a combination of elements.

The central theme in the early attempts to apply Gestalt principles to psychoanalytic theory is the recognition that the Gestalt whole transcends the sum of the individual parts of the system. But how exactly this principle is to be applied concretely is largely absent.

Attempts to apply Gestalt principles to psychometric tests were also made, but were only moderately more successful. In the 1930s, psychiatrist Laretta BENDER (1938) published a test intended to assess brain injury by asking respondents to reproduce simple figures taken from the Gestalt literature on perception. The Bender-Gestalt Test gained some popularity and a few other psychometric tests - MOONEY & FERGUSON (1951), Street (1934) - were developed based on Gestalt principles. BROSIN and FROMM in 1942 proposed, that the Gestalt concept of Prägnanz offers one of the best bases for interpretation of the Rorschach Psychodiagnostic Inkblot Test.

Conclusion

Although primarily the product of research on cognition, Gestalt psychology does provide some potentially fruitful insights into psychopathology. In the concept of isomorphism, Gestalt theory acknowledges the interrelation between brain functioning and behavior, and specifies the interrelation of both psychogenic and somatogenic sources of psychopathology. Further, Gestalt theory emphasizes the perspective, that for healthy functioning, an individual must find a meaningful place, role and function in society and, that the lack of meaningful functioning as a "social part" is a source of pathology. Although, there appears to be no historical connection, this theoretical perspective has recently re-emerged in some aspects of Heinz KOHUT's psychoanalytically-oriented "Self Psychology."

The early contributions of Gestalt theory to psychopathology have remained largely unnoticed. One explanation for why this may have occurred is, that in addressing psychopathology, Gestalt theory in the early years remained primarily theoretical, as in the treatment of psychopathology in Kurt KOFFKA's massive 1935

book, *Principles of Gestalt psychology* and, that little applied work was done to utilize Gestalt theory in the treatment of psychopathology. Although Fritz PERLS later claimed to apply Gestalt principles in a clinical setting, various scholars recognized the value of a holistic perspective long before PERLS, and several scholars closely associated with the Gestalt school have argued convincingly that PERLS's approach has nothing to do with classical Gestalt theory. Some Gestalt psychologists, notably SCHULTE and LEVY, effectively used Gestalt psychology to illuminate some issues in psychopathology. Other theorists shared a general holistic approach with Gestalt psychologists but were not completely consistent with the Gestalt model. Others still tried to find common ground between Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis.

All in all, the basic principles of the Gestalt school may still be useful in the domain of psychopathology. Indeed, many articles in this journal, *Gestalt Theory*, the official organ of the Society for Gestalt Theory and Its Applications, have tried to apply classical Gestalt theory to problems of psychopathology and psychotherapy during more than two decades. But these applications have occurred quite recently, long after the first half of the twentieth century, the period on which the present report tried to focus on.

Zusammenfassung

Die Gestalt-Psychologie liefert fruchtbare Einsichten in das Wesen der Psychopathologie. Das Gestalttheoretische Konzept des Isomorphismus betont die Wechselwirkung von Funktionen des Gehirns und dem Verhalten. Ein weiteres Konzept betont die Wichtigkeit des sozialen Teils, das „WIR“, des Menschen. Wenn dieses „WIR“ nicht erlebt und gelebt wird, kann dies zu pathologischem Verhalten führen. In Abgrenzung zu PERLS's Gestalt-Therapie und unter Betrachtung Psychoanalytischer bzw. Individual Psychologischer Ansätze, wird in diesem Artikel versucht, der Gestalt-Theorie den ihr zustehenden Platz zum Verstehen pathologischem Verhaltens einzuräumen.

Summary

Gestalt psychology does provide some potentially fruitful insights into psychopathology. In the concept of isomorphism, Gestalt theory acknowledges the interrelation between brain functioning and behavior, and specifies the interrelation of both psychogenic and somatogenic sources of psychopathology. Further, Gestalt theory emphasizes the perspective, that for healthy functioning, an individual must find a meaningful place, role and function in society and, that the lack of meaningful functioning as a "social part" is a source of pathology. In discussing the differences to PERLS's Gestalt therapy and reviewing psychoanalytic concepts, this article focuses on the important role the Gestalt Theory takes in understanding problems of psychopathology.

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