

COMMENTS ON THE CONCEPT OF CLOSURE

by Abraham S. Luchins and Edith H. Luchins (1959)

Extract from: A.S. LUCHINS & E.H. LUCHINS, *Rigidity of Behavior - A Variational Approach to the Effect of Einstellung*. Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Books, 1959 (pp. 273, 281f)

[273:] The concept of closure was introduced by WERTHEIMER in his paper on the principles of perceptual organization (1923). Closure was considered as only one of several Gestalt principles of organization, all assuming to be operating in the direction of *Prägnanz*, a word used by WERTHEIMER to denote a tendency for organization to be as "good" (as clear, as stable) as is possible under prevailing conditions. Specifically, the principle of closure refers to the tendency towards greater perceptual stability possessed by closed areas as compared with enclosed ones, and hence to the tendency for closed areas to be more readily attained and maintained in perception. But, in actual use, the concept of closure has been given other and broader interpretations.

[281f:] Analysis of the utilization of the concept of closure left us with the impression that a multiplicity of meanings is associated with the concept. To begin with, "closure" is used, even in Gestalt psychological writings, to denote

(1) a *process*,

(2) a *resultant* or terminating phase or consummation of the process, and, finally,

(3) a *principle* underlying the process;

for example, the term "closure" has been applied to the process of "completing" an incomplete circle, and to the perceived "completed" circle itself, and finally to the principle or Gestalt law which is basal to this process. Moreover, despite WERTHEIMER's denial that closure is necessarily the dominant factor in organization, some current writings imply that a tendency toward closure is necessarily the main, even the sole, factor in a sensory or cognitive organization. Indeed, closure is sometimes used as if it were synonymous with *organization* or with *Prägnanz*. Closure has also been used as if it were synonymous with *insight* or with any *restructurization* of the field. It has been used to denote the act of extracting meaning from the environment and the act of deducing conclusions. In addition, the term is sometimes employed as if it were equivalent to the terms *Gestalt* and *good Gestalt*.

Some example of the diversity of the meanings which may be attached to the term, even by the same writers, can be obtained by scanning through a text such as ALLPORT and POSTMAN's (1947) on the psychology of rumor. They speak of "closure" as the achievement of a "better Gestalt" or as the achievement of a "simpler, more significant configuration" (p. 56), or as a "form of sharpening" (p. 97), or as "the subject's urge to make his experiences as complete, coherent and meaningful as possible" (p. 97). Noting that "we continually seek to extract meaning from our environment" (p. 37), they speak of the "pursuit of a 'good closure'" as the search for a "plausible reason for a confused situation" (p. 37); they also refer to a "good closure" as an experience,

writing: "We experience a good closure when we find satisfying explanations and when our view of a situation is clear and stable" (p. 37, n.).

I would probably be futile to get involved here in any discussion of whether it is proper for a psychological concept to have so many meanings. Certainly the ambiguity does not add to the clarity of writings pertaining to closure. Perhaps it may add to the meaningfulness and usefulness of the concept of closure if the term is used only when evidence is available that a process of closure (in the sense originally used by WERTHEIMER) is operative. In particular, attempts to account for rigidity in terms of closure (or vice versa) or to relate rigidity to closure, will generate less confusion if the term closure is explicitly defined and if the evidence supporting a process of closure is clearly presented. Personally, we advocate a moratorium on the use of this term despite the current popularity of Gestalt terminology.

References:

ALLPORT, G.W., & POSTMAN, L. (1947): Psychology of Rumor. New York: Henry Holt.

WERTHEIMER, M. (1923): Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt, II. Psychol. Forsch., 4: 301-89. Condensed in Selection 22 in

W.D. ELLIS (ed.), 1938, A source book of Gestalt psychology. New York: Harcourt, Brace.

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