

# Roots and Shoots of Gestalt Therapy Field Theory: Historical and Theoretical Developments

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Of the three theoretical pillars of Gestalt therapy, phenomenology, the dialogic theory and field theory, the latter often seems the most difficult to integrate into a theoretical framework of psychotherapy. One of the reasons for this may be that field theory<sup>2</sup>, as it originated in physics, examines the nature of physical reality and thus can seem removed from the clinical practice of psychotherapy. Furthermore, for field theory to be useful in the world of psychology, it needed to evolve and expand, and the inclusion of influences from many different sources made it increasingly complex. However, situating field theory within its historical context and following its development from a theory in physics to its expansion and adaptation to the human social world can help to integrate it into the larger Gestalt theory frame. In this paper I will try to show that the theory has evolved into something quite specific that is best referred to as Gestalt therapy field theory.

The paper will focus on the four major aspects of Gestalt therapy field theory. The first three of those elements developed sequentially and will be presented in chronological order, and thus will also trace the historical lineage of the conception of field theory as it pertains to Gestalt therapy. The final segment does not follow this pattern, though it will lead us to current discussions regarding some field theory concepts in Gestalt therapy. Gary Yontef, one of the foremost contributors to Gestalt therapy theory, has asserted that a complete system of psychotherapy requires at least three elements: a theory about the therapeutic relationship, a theory of consciousness, and a scientific theory, which for Gestalt therapy is field theory (Yontef, 1993, p. 202, 203).

A scientific theory is a description of an aspect of the physical world, and as such, it is part of how we as a culture and as the individuals embedded within it view reality. Our collective and individual assumptions about our world impact the way in which we make decisions, live our lives, and, for psychotherapists, how we approach our professional task. However, a humanistic psychotherapy model such as Gestalt therapy cannot truly lay claim to a science-based theory.<sup>3</sup>

It may be more accurate to say that Gestalt therapy's field theory traces some of its roots to the physical sciences, and it is these roots that we will consider first in this paper.

### **I. The first conceptualization of the field concept in physics**

Western intellectual tradition often refers back to antiquity when discussing the nature of reality, and we find that even the ancient Greeks conceptualized conflicting ontological models (Goldman, 2007, p. 7). Even before Plato's time, the Greek philosopher Democritus proposed the idea that an unchanging substance, matter, underlay a multifaceted and changeable world (Bohm, 1980, p. 10). The Greeks' term for the simplest and indivisible component of this substance was the atom. It was thought that these atoms would join together in a Lego-like manner to construct the world as it appears to us. Change was seen as "a rearrangement of things that themselves are changeless" (Goldman, 2007, p. 95). These ideas led to a materialistic view of the nature of reality - a reality composed of timeless, elementary substances with fixed properties (Goldman, 2007, p. 24).

On the other side of this argument, philosophers such as Heraclitus suggested that not matter, but the process of change was fundamental (Bohm, 1980, p. 61). In his view, no changeless unit of matter, such as the atom, existed, "everything changes; no *thing* remains the same" (Cited in Goldman, 2007, p. 78, italics in the original). In contrast to materialistic theory, this conception understood nature as a dynamic process and held that matter was not the underlying reality of the world. Instead, reality was seen as a web of rule-governed processes (Goldman, 2007, p. 24).

Throughout European history, these worldviews shifted as one or the other became dominant during different time periods and in different cultures. An example of a more process minded leaning might be the belief in supernatural forces, spiritual or superstitious, prevalent during the Middle Ages in Europe, which held that a heavenly, otherworldly reality underlay the appearances of the manifested world.<sup>4</sup>

However, beginning in the seventeenth century and continuing until the end of the nineteenth century, the materialistic worldview became more dominant in western cultures. This view held that life is fundamentally a chemical, physical and mechanical phenomenon (Goldman, 2007, p. 99). To a great extent, this depiction was the result of ideas from philosophers and scientists such as Descartes and Newton, who described the perceived world in an increasingly materialistic fashion. For instance, phenomena that had earlier been explained through supernatural influences were now looked at through the

lens of Newton's "laws of nature" on matter and motion (Tyson, 2007, p. 249). Confidence in a materialistic worldview grew steadily as Newton's theories were verified through scientific experiments, and as they found their way into many technological applications. A well known analogy of the time compared the universe to a clock or a machine, with the implication that knowledge of the underlying workings of this machine would give rise to an understanding about the larger aspects of our world (Kaku, 1995, p. 43). Therefore, scientific researchers in diverse fields studied phenomena by looking at their smallest components and then deducing the workings of larger structures from their findings (Bohm, 1980, pp. 11, 153).

The atomistic trend reached its high point in the middle of the nineteenth century. By this time, the cell theory of life, the germ theory of disease and the gene theory of inheritance had been created/discovered, and a kind of societal atomism could be seen in the rise of individualism (Goldman, 2007, p. 4). All of these theories held the common idea that elementary units with fixed properties produced the phenomena under study (Goldman, 2007, p. 99).

Nonetheless, even during this period in which the atomistic conception enjoyed great success, certain phenomena could not be explained through the physical sciences of the day (Bohm, 1980, p. 5). For instance, the concept and phenomenon of energy did not fit into the scheme of linear cause and effect, the basis of Newtonian physics. Similarly, the physicist Michael Faraday, who worked with electricity and magnetism, encountered forces that influenced a wide area of space in a non-linear fashion (Einstein, 2005, p. 82), which led him to conceptualize and coin the term "field." He designed an experiment, still used in schools today, in which he sprinkled iron filings on a flat surface and held a magnet underneath it. As many of us have experienced, the filings organise themselves in a manner that suggests force lines or a force field. Faraday, and later the physicist Maxwell, who further developed field theory,<sup>5</sup> had difficulties fitting the field concept into a Newtonian framework, because they could not identify the physical mechanism with which the fields transmitted energy and forces. As waves move on the ocean and sound waves travel through the air, phenomena like light waves, electrical energy and electromagnetic fields were thought to require a medium in order to travel through space. Due to these assumptions about physical reality, Faraday conceptualized an all-pervasive physical medium called the aether as substrata of the field phenomenon (Zohar, 1990, p. 26).

However, nineteenth century scientists could not verify the existence of the aether. For example, in science circles the well-respected Michelson-Morley experiment of 1887 did not show its expected result by failing to demonstrate the earth's drag on the aether as it traveled through space (Einstein, 2005, p.

70). Other persistent problems concerned the scientific community at this time, such as the apparent, but unexplained, constancy of the speed of light (Tyson, 2007, p. 35). Nonetheless, confidence in the fundamental correctness of the Newtonian scientific model was still strong. Some even believed that scientific exploration would soon reach its end. Incredibly, Lord Kelvin, a renowned physicist of the time, thought “there is nothing new to be discovered in physics now. All that remains is more and more measurement.” (Tyson, 2007, p. 1).

This changed dramatically with the work of Albert Einstein. His papers on the special and general theories of relativity, published in 1905 and 1915 respectively, overthrew many of the fundamental ideas of science that had seemed unshakeable, and from that point onwards the scientific worldview changed significantly (Tyson, 2007, p. 19; Zohar, 1990, p. 20). Concerning field theory, Einstein’s new ideas confirmed the existence of fields without requiring a precondition such as the aether. Fields were now established as real, even though they were immaterial! (Kaku, 1995, p. 22).

*Einstein proposed that the particle concept no longer be taken as primary, and that instead reality be regarded from the very beginning as constituted of fields, obeying laws that are consistent with the requirements of the theory of relativity. ...Ultimately, the entire universe (with all its ‘particles’, including those constituting human beings, their laboratories, observing instruments, etc.) has to be understood as a single undivided whole, in which analysis into separately and independently existent parts has no fundamental status (Bohm, 1980, pp. 220, 221).*

Thus, the notions about ultimate reality had shifted again, and the Newtonian view of a mechanistic world was subsumed within a more process-driven vision of nature: “not only is everything changing, but all is in flux. That is to say, *what is* is the process of becoming itself, while all objects, events, entities, conditions, structures, etc., are forms that can be abstracted from this process” (Bohm, 1980, p. 61, italics in the original).

A field is not a physical entity by itself, but instead, the term describes mutually influencing forces that act upon each other. Even though fields do not consist of a material substance, according to Einstein’s theories, their reality is no longer in question (Goldman, 2007, p. 125). Aspects of this new field model, such as the conceptualization of phenomena without the linear cause-effect scheme of Newtonian physics and the notion of a field of immaterial influence, would eventually become cornerstones for a field theory in psychology.

Field theory as articulated by Einstein was followed by other breakthroughs in physics such as quantum theory. Due to the indeterminism of Heisenberg’s

uncertainty principle, for example, quantum theory turned out to be an even greater challenge to the Newtonian mechanistic order (Kaku, 1995, p. 43). Both the Einsteinian field theory and quantum field theory pointed to a multi-causal, non-linear, and interconnected relationship between an event or dynamic and other, previously unconnected seeming aspects of the physical world (Bohm, 1980, pp. 157, 167).

These new theories were in due course accepted within the scientific community, but it took further developments to reveal their potential relevance for the realm of human psychology. Research psychologist Max Wertheimer, a friend of Albert Einstein's<sup>6</sup>, was responsible for one of these advances, and with his associates did the pioneering work that led to the founding of Gestalt psychology.

## **II. The emergence of the field concept in psychology**

Gestalt psychology began as a research endeavor and as a movement against the established assumptions within the field of psychology at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Wertheimer and his students, Koffka and Köhler, who later became his collaborators, began their early work on perception during this period, and Wertheimer published his first paper in 1912.<sup>8</sup> The prevalent theory on perception at the time was informed by the concepts of elementarism, associationism and meaning theory (Heidbreder, 1933, p. 339). Elementarism assumed that we take in the world in a mosaic fashion. The process of association was speculated to organize the sum of this stimulation into larger perceivable pictures. Meaning theory posited that we then relate these sensations to earlier experiences and thus create a meaningful perception of our world (Heidbreder, 1933, p. 340). The assumption that individual units of sensory stimulation exist independently and only later accrue into larger perceivable structures demonstrated that the atomistic trend had found its way into the nineteenth century theories of psychology.

In opposition to this, the Gestalt psychologists argued that experience is structured rather than assembled piecemeal, meaning that we perceive in segregated wholes,<sup>9</sup> which they termed Gestalten. The term Gestalt can have several meanings, but here it describes the perception of a total situation.<sup>10</sup> In one of many experiments designed to illustrate this point, Köhler placed some chickenfeed on two sheets of paper; one colored a lighter and the other one a darker shade of gray. He then conditioned some hens to eat only from the darker sheet. With that accomplished, he removed the lighter one and substituted a sheet that was even darker than the one he had left. Köhler observed that the hens now went to the newer, darkest sheet, rather than the one

that they had previously been conditioned to eat from. He reasoned that the hens did not merely learn to respond to concrete stimuli, such as the exact color of the sheets, but that they instead processed the relationship between different aspects of the whole field. He concluded that the hens needed to take in the total situation in order to create meaning from the different parts within it (Heidbreder, 1933, p. 360).

From this example we can infer the thrust of one of the Gestalt psychologists' most important arguments; that in the process of perceiving, we take in the whole or total situation, not just its individual parts. In other words, we do not just respond to segregated stimuli and then learn to put them together, but instead we immediately organize our perception into relations that are part of the configuration of the total field (Gold, 1999, pp. 64, 65).

The Gestalt psychologists eventually widened their scope to look for the Gestalt process operating in nature. For instance, they viewed the solar system as a Gestalt, because the interaction of its physical forces maintained a high degree of organization without influences imposed from outside the system. They realized that field forces, by acting upon each other, produced order. For example, atoms form molecules through dynamic interactions, without the special arrangement that would be necessary in a machine (Heidbreder, 1933, p. 356; Köhler, 1947, p. 120). This Gestalt theory relates very much to the field concept in physics and is a non-mechanistic or post-Newtonian conceptualization of natural phenomena, in which organization is part of the natural process and at the same time order is the result of natural forces (Bohm, 1980, p. 152).

The Gestalt psychologists tackled other organizational processes closer to the sphere of human psychology, including memory, learning and thinking. In addition, and especially important for the development of field theory in psychology, they considered the process of human meaning making to have as much significance as natural, experimental data. They believed that the process of meaning creation was needed for a full understanding of the world. For instance, they felt that awareness of the relational connections within a field was important for the conceptualization of mental processes (Heidbreder, 1933, p. 356). Thinking, for example, involves the recognition of structures, patterns and relationships. The Gestalt psychologists considered an insightful awareness to be a new Gestalt in itself and to be curative in its own right, because it enhances a person's capacity for organismic self-regulation. For example, as a person begins to appreciate the value of his conflicting motivations, his interest and his attitude towards his emotional experience will change. As a result, he often will become more accepting and less critical of himself.

An important theoretical assumption that evolved out of the work of the

Gestalt psychologists is the idea that people always function within an interactive realm in which the individual and the environment are interdependent parts of a whole field (Gold, 1999, p. 32). The Gestalt psychologists trusted direct experience and emphasized the use of phenomenological exploration. Decades later, this led the founding theorists of Gestalt therapy to adopt an experience-near psychotherapeutic approach (Perls, et al, 1951).

### **III. The development of field principles for Gestalt therapy**

In the book, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, two of the founders of Gestalt therapy, Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman, alluded to, but did not develop, the field concept (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951, p. 4).<sup>11</sup> It was left to later Gestalt therapists, such as Latner, Parlett and Yontef, to elaborate on the significance of field theory for clinical practice (Latner, 1983; Parlett, 1991; 2005, Yontef, 1993).

In order to make field theory more useful for clinical psychology, these contemporary writers began to articulate principles of a field perspective. Four of those principles are holism, the idea that phenomena are determined by the whole field, the principle of contemporaneity, or the here and now, and field self-organization.

#### **1. Holism**

Both relativity and quantum theory look at the universe as an undivided whole (Bohm, 1980, p. 13, 218). Parlett articulated this notion for Gestalt therapy by saying that “the essence of field theory is that a holistic perspective towards the person extends to include environment, the social world, organisations and culture” (1991, p. 70). In other words, studying elements of a system or a phenomenon will not yield sufficient knowledge about the workings of the whole, and the dynamics of the entire system working together is different from the interactions between parts. In the following quote, Malcom Parlett discusses the holistic approach of the Gestalt psychologists:

*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 (2005, p. 43).*

Gestalt therapy’s holistic concept leads one to view people as inherently

self-regulating and growth oriented, and also supports the belief that “one moves toward wholeness by identifying with ongoing experience, being in contact with what is actually happening, identifying and trusting what one genuinely feels and wants” (Jacobs & Yontef, 1998, p. 329).

Another element of the holistic notion is that everything is part of a larger field, and that “a field is a systematic web of relationships and exists in a context of even larger webs of relationship” (Yontef, 1993, p. 298). A concept that is closely related to this notion of interconnectedness is “the principle of possible relevance”, which states that we cannot know in advance which are the essential aspects of a person’s experience (Philippsen, 2001, p. 18). In therapeutic work, the totality of a situation must be explored in order to determine what is salient to the present concern of the client. Therefore, as therapists we are challenged on one hand to find a pertinent figure or theme in our work with a client, and on the other to realize that our understanding will always stay provisional.

## **2. Phenomena are determined by the field conditions.**

Using a field perspective, the causality of a phenomenon is difficult to establish. If we take into consideration all relevant influences of the physical environment, the complex dynamics of our own psychological states, and the phenomenal fields of the people around us, we begin to appreciate the impossibility of attributing a “correct” causal relationship within current events and dynamics. A field is not a static thing, but instead refers to a dynamic interactional process.<sup>12</sup> For example, a son’s relationship with his parents shifts as he gets older and as he develops different interests and needs. As he lives longer, he will be exposed to new challenges in school, will have experiences of failure and success never encountered before, and so forth. Each of these factors will have an impact on the experience of each family member, and thus the son’s relationship to his parents is an ever-changing dynamic impacted by many factors in the field: “Every event, experience, object or organism is determined by the field of which it is part. All movements of any part are determined by the whole field” (Yontef, 1993, p. 305).

In the therapeutic situation, the therapist is part of the client’s environment, which includes the complex ways in which the therapist creates meaning for him or herself in relation to the client, and vice versa, the client is part of the therapist’s experiential field.<sup>13</sup> Thus, events and dynamics in the therapeutic situation cannot be explained or determined by the expertise of just one person, not even the therapist. Nor can the therapist rely on a particular theory of psychology that he or she has become familiar with to presume a correct interpretation of the situation.



### **3. Here and now - the principle of contemporaneity**

According to phenomenology, experience arises out of the meeting between our perceptual faculties and “the raw matter of the world” (Spinelli, 2005, p. 12). The phenomenon of experience occurs only in the present, in the here and now, and, like any field phenomenon, it is subject to the conditions of the field.<sup>14</sup>

In everyday language we slice up time into segments such as past, present, and future, and as a result the terms take on a thing-like quality. This creates the implication that memory, for example, is an unchangeable, substantive item – like a document filed away on the computer. However, terms regarding time, like many other words used to describe complex processes, are only convenient ways of temporarily referring to an ongoing, dynamic process influenced by many factors. In the words of Malcom Parlett: “future events, planned or fantasised, are not given special status (as ‘goals’ or ‘incentives’) but again are seen as part of what is occurring in the present” (1991, p. 49). The past does not directly influence current experience, but the way in which meaning is given to past events impacts the experience of the here and now. For example, empathising with a client regarding her experience of neglect by her mother will, to some degree, influence the therapist’s memory of his or her own mother. Memory is the present process that engages both the body and mind in relationship to a particular event in the past.

*A patient’s life story cannot tell you what actually happened in his or her past, but it can tell you how the patient experiences his or her history in the here and now. That rendition of history is shaped to some degree by the patient’s current conditions (Jacobs & Yontef, 1998, p. 329).*

For instance, as I listen to my client, I find myself appreciating a particular way in which my mother supported me. In the next moment I recognize with greater clarity how distant I felt from her. For both my client and me, memories or the experience of our past shift as our dialogue moves along.

### **4. Field self-organization**

An important idea that has been integrated into Gestalt therapy theory and draws from the work of the Gestalt psychologists is the concept of *Prägnanz*, which refers to the idea that, “the field forms itself in as orderly a way as possible – with as much cleanness and definiteness – directedness and economy, stability and strength, as the global conditions allow” (Yontef, 1993, p. 246). As a Gestalt concept, it also refers to the process of field self-organization.

For example, water adapts to its conditions by flowing within its environment, and by changing its properties as it is exposed to heat or cold,

turning into steam or ice. The way water adapts to field conditions, yet at the same time shapes its environment (see the Grand Canyon!), illustrates how a phenomenon, in this case the behavior of water, organizes itself given the circumstances within the field. However, this serves only as an analogy for the much more complex physiological, emotional and intellectual processes within the human realm of meaning making.

Our experience, the most intimate of human processes, and one that we usually consider as our “property,” is also a field phenomenon, and subject to the same organizational field processes (Yontef, 1993, p. 305). In other words, our experiences, including our experience of self, is a manifestation of *Prägnanz*, as “fields organize into figures and grounds in the most sophisticated, complex, differentiated and unified manner, given the available resources of our field” (Jacobs, 2004, p. 43).<sup>15</sup>

The elaboration of field principles and definitions for psychology created new ways of understanding for psychotherapists and has furthered the influence of a field perspective.<sup>16</sup> Another element of Gestalt therapy field theory, and possibly the most difficult one for therapists to integrate, is the difference between an understanding of a field as a physical phenomenon and as a way of thinking about human experience.

#### **IV. The articulation of the phenomenal field model**

This fourth aspect of Gestalt therapy field theory does not follow the chronological order of the first three that I have discussed in this paper, as it begins with Kurt Lewin’s notion of “life space.” Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) was an early collaborator of the Gestalt psychologists Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka, and worked with them at the University of Berlin (Wertheimer & King, 2005, p. 153). He took the field concept into the realm of inter-human experience and for psychotherapy into clinical relevance. One of the important concepts he developed was the idea of life space (Gold, 1999, p. 11).

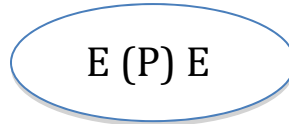
*Life space includes all facts which have existence for the person and excludes those which do not. It embraces needs, goals, unconscious influences, memories, beliefs, events of political, economic, and social nature, and anything else that might have direct effect on behavior* (Marrow, 1969, p. 34, as cited in Staemmler, 2006, p. 69).

As illustrated in the following diagram, Lewin used topological formulas in order to demonstrate how the behavior and experience of an individual is the result of the psychologically relevant forces in a person’s life space

(Staemmler, 2006, p. 69).

**Figure 1: P (Person) + E (Environment) = Life Space**

Life Space:



Life space consists of the person (P) plus his or her contact with the environment (E) – in other words, the person’s experiential world. Thus Lewin placed all experiences, including the person’s sense of self, within the realm of life space, and looked at experience and behaviour as an expression of the interaction between a person and his or her environment (Gold, 1999, pp. 11, 68, 171).<sup>17</sup> In some writings on Gestalt therapy, life space has been referred to as a phenomenal field, making the connection to field theory more clear, and the terms have become interchangeable (Brownell, 2010, p. 137; Staemmler, 2006, p. 67).<sup>18</sup>

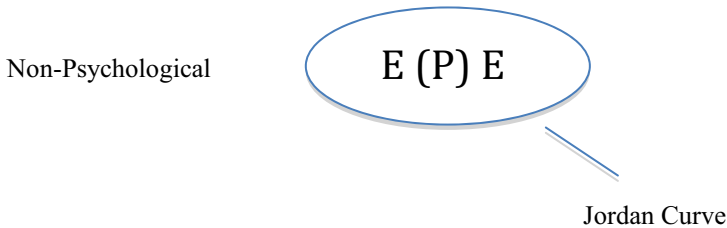
The Gestalt psychologists and Lewin regarded the process of meaning creation as an important aspect of the field perspective, and acknowledged subjective experience as one of the field forces that needed to be included in theories of psychology. To say that a person’s experience is the product of field conditions is far from a linear causal explanation of a person’s meaning making and behavioural decision process. For example, Freudian psychoanalysis, embedded in nineteenth century science and philosophy (Yontef, 1993, p. 359), theorizes predetermined processes such as unconscious drives and conflicts, and uses the archeological analogy of uncovering deeply buried causes, such as past events, to explain a client’s current experience (Stolorow et al, 1987, p. 7). In contrast, the field perspective asserts that within a field, forces exert influence on each other in unpredictable, non-linear ways. Non-linearity here refers to a dynamic multifaceted causality; in other words, cause and effect cannot be determined easily or attributed to a selected number of facts.

*An Elaboration of Lewin’s Concept of Life Space*

In his 2006 paper, Frank M. Staemmler clarified some of the confusions he had observed concerning the term “field” in Gestalt therapy literature, and he also elaborated on Lewin’s concept of life space. This concept is elucidated in the following quote (as cited in Staemmler, 2006, p. 69):

*In this illustration we encounter the oval again... This oval is an example of the 'Jordan curve' that Lewin used in his 'topological' approach as a means of representing psychological situations. ...the total space within the Jordan curve, including the ellipse, is the life space. It represents the person and the psychological environment. The space outside represents the non-psychological world – of either physical or social facts (Marrow, 1969, p. 39).*

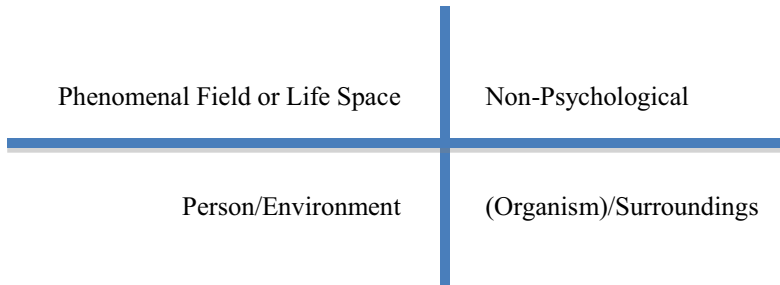
**Figure 2: Lewin’s diagram of life space with the additional terms.**



The line of the Jordan curve describes the boundary that delineates a person’s phenomenal field. Anything not experienced by the person is outside of the Jordan curve and is thus not part of the phenomenal field. Only part of what is outside the Jordan curve is potentially accessible to experience. For instance, before a client contacts me, this person is outside my Jordan curve. As soon as I meet or talk to the client, he or she “moves inside” my phenomenal field and becomes what in Lewin’s diagram is represented as “environment.”<sup>19</sup>

Staemmler clarified Lewin’s concept of life space by including the term “organism” within this scheme – Figure 3 (2006, p. 70). Organism here refers to the aspects of a person’s physiological processes that are not part of life space, in other words, processes that are not experienced.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 3:**



This is how Staemmler described the schema above:

*The field or life space is composed of both person and environment; the non-psychological realm is composed of both organism and surroundings. The bold, vertical line in the table represents the Jordan curve. The dashes between the respective two terms indicate that they designate subject-matters that can be distinguished although they are closely connected and integral parts of their respective realms (field or non-psychological) (Staemmler, 2006, p. 70).*

This conceptualization helps us to distinguish between the phenomenal field and the non-psychological. It clarifies for example, that even one’s own body can be experienced as “environment”, and that there are aspects of the world outside the Jordan curve of Lewin’s formula that will never be part of my phenomenal field. For instance, the way in which cells divide within my body, although part of my own physiology, cannot be experienced by me and thus is located outside of the Jordan curve - in Lewin’s words are part of the “unpsychological.”<sup>21</sup> Body processes that are not accessible to experience are referred to as “organism” in the Staemmler diagram (Figure 3).

The following situation exemplifies these categories: On the way from the waiting room to my office I stub my toe. My experience during this event is referred to as “person” in Lewin’s diagram (Figure 1). This includes the physical pain in my toe, the upset that I feel, and my concern over the alarm in my client’s face as she looks at me. The table leg I stubbed my toe on and my startled client are part of the “environment” in Lewin’s diagram. Some of the physiological processes that occurred, such as the stimulation of the nerves in my foot and the neurological messages sent to my brain before they were translated into an experientiable sensation such as pain, are part of “organism,”

the not-experienced physiological processes of my body. There are other factors in the world that are not part of my life space, called “surroundings” in the diagram (Figure 3), such as the microwave radiation that permeates the cosmos or the subatomic activity of the table I stubbed my toe on. These are not part of my phenomenal field.

As we can see, conceptually, with the introduction of an experiential field, we enter a complex arena. To warn, for example, about the possibility of confusing physical and psychological fields, Staemmler called it a category mistake<sup>22</sup> to compare the two without acknowledging their difference in type (2006, p. 67).<sup>23</sup>

Staemmler points out correctly that it would be a mistake to imply that a physical field is the same as a phenomenal field. The first refers to the physical world and the second to the world of experience. However, it also needs to be said, that phenomenal fields and physical fields do not exist within different realms of reality. Otherwise we are taking a step back towards Cartesian dualism.<sup>24</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the concept of field has been a way to conceptualize phenomena in the physical world and in the domain of physics measurements and formulas have been developed that describe the physical reality of those fields. But phenomenal fields refer foremost to the distinct meaning making process of an individual person. It is not possible to measure this process and thus it is not appropriate for the physical sciences. The phenomenal field is an explanatory theory in psychology that refers to the ongoing interaction between a person’s physical sensations, emotional and mental experience, all the factors that influence these processes and the meaning making activity that develops from this dynamic.

For psychotherapeutic practice it is absolutely necessary to be able to differentiate between the world of physical facts and the world of experience. The Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Köhler spoke to this distinction when he discussed the difference between what he called an objective and a subjective experience (Köhler, 1947, p. 20). By objective experience, he referred to the idea that we do not take in the world as it is, but only as we are able to perceive it. For instance, only a certain spectrum of light is visible to human eyes. Köhler understood that in the act of perceiving, our perceptual faculties are already engaged in a kind of translation of the world (Spinelli, 2005, p. 6). Of course, there is a lot of overlap or agreement over what is being perceived (Jacobs, 2009, p. 48). People usually do not disagree about the notion that we live on a planet, or that there are a certain number of students in a particular lecture hall. However, even the phenomena that we call facts are not fixed entities, as:

*it is important to note that facts are not to be considered as if they were independently existent objects that we might find or pick up in the laboratory. Rather, as the Latin root of the word 'facere' indicates, the fact is 'what has been made' (e.g., as in 'manufacture'). Thus, in a certain sense, we 'make' the fact (Bohm, 1980, p. 179).*

In addition to this fact-making process, another interpretive leap occurs when psychological meaning is added to our sensory perception. Köhler called this process subjective experience (1947, p. 20). For example, while we would not expect a disagreement with fellow listeners about whether there are twenty people in a lecture hall, we can be sure that each of us will have a different experience while participating in the same event. There may only be slight differences in the way in which our senses absorb the situation, but our unique meaning making processes create differences that range from the insignificant to the dramatic.

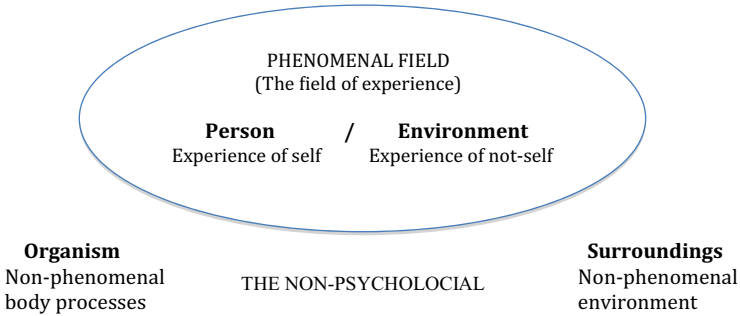
For example, the voice of a lecturer seems boring to one listener, while his neighbor is very drawn in by the sound of the words. Someone else feels excitedly part of the event, while his friend is thinking about the “oppressive atmosphere” in the room, and wants to leave as soon as possible. Many factors, such as our personal histories, our self-esteem in a particular social situation, our current mood, whether we feel connected or not to those around us, our age and gender or whether we feel part of a minority, among others - all contribute to how we take in, evaluate, and act on our perception in a given situation. Consequently, how something is experienced cannot be predetermined, and one's own experience will often not be an adequate reference point to be able to predict how an event or dynamic impacts another person.

Phenomenal field theory has influenced various concepts in Gestalt therapy theory. I will elaborate on two in particular, the concepts of self and perspectivalism.

### **The concept of self**

In my reading of Lewin's life space formula, the term “person” is used synonymously with “experience of self”, and the term “environment” correlates with “experience of not-self” (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: The diagram below incorporates Lewin’s schema of life space and Staemmler’s addition of the term “organism” with the concept of self.**



The experiences of self and not-self are achieved through the processes of identification and alienation and are not bound by the confines of the physical body (Philippon, 2001, p. 20). Parts of the body can be alienated from a person’s sense of self, and parts of what is outside the body can be identified with as self. It can be useful to conceptualize this remarkably flexible process of experiencing self and not-self on a continuum with degrees of identification and non-identification. For instance, my house, my child or my political views might play quite an important role in my experience of self, while what food I eat or how I care for my body might not have such a great influence on my self-identification. Therefore, identification in terms of ideas, values, needs, emotional responses and even awareness of physical processes is interwoven with the body, but is not bound to it. It could be said that our phenomenology, not our physiology, determines what feels to us “closer to the bone”.

Another facet of the self-process is the intersubjective aspect of experience. As articulated by Wheeler (2009): “Our ‘environment’, after all, our evolutionary niche, is the social world – the intersubjective field” (p. 35). The experience of self does not only refer to our relationship with our social environment, but also implies that “we have no experience that is prior to relatedness” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 48). Our sense of self exists and is shaped by the social environment that we are and have been in contact with. As some intersubjectivist psychoanalysts have expressed, “for us, an intersubjective field ... is neither a mode of experiencing nor a sharing of experience. It is the contextual precondition for having any experience at all” (Stolorow, et al, 2002, p. 85). Thus, our sense of who we are is inextricably intertwined with everything that we consider “outside” of us – the “not-me”. Wheeler called



this “a radical paradigm of belonging. We are relational before, beneath, and around our individuality” (2009, p. 20).

### **The perspectival worldview**

The differentiation between the physical world and the phenomenal field has been an important feature of the field concept in Gestalt therapy, which has also led to a perspectival worldview; “The world is only revealed from a point of view, and that view is consciousness” (McConville, 2001, p. 198).

With this quote, McConville proposes that our consciousness is our individual and unique window into the world and into what we call reality. It is our particular position within the contexts of our lives: our culture, gender, race, personal history, values and beliefs, among many others. Lynne Jacobs has used the term “social location” to describe how these contexts continually influence us and shape the way in which we view and give meaning to an event (2006). We could say that our “location” within these different contexts colors our view and creates a particular “hue” through which we see the world.<sup>25</sup> It is a valid perspective, but only our specific and unique window to reality.

In the field of psychology, even in the psychoanalytic community, there has been a dramatic shift away from what the psychoanalytic intersubjectivist Stolorow has called the fallacy of an “immaculate perception,” or the idea that an analyst holds a more privileged, more correct view of the world than the client (Stolorow, et al, 2002, p. 76). Stolorow and his collaborators have embraced the idea of perspectivalism, and refer to an “intersubjective field” when discussing the psychoanalytic situation (2002, p. 34). For Gestalt theory, perspectivalism is a necessary consequence that flows from phenomenal field theory. If all of experience is unique, at least to some degree, there is no one correct perspective that can be invoked – neither for the therapist nor for the client. Our experience is the product of our multifaceted phenomenal field, and our perspective depends on the particular events and dynamics within that field, including the interaction between the perceiver and the perceived. This means that the one thing that we can be certain of in a psychotherapy session is that the client will have a different experience of the therapy situation than the therapist (Orage, 2010, p. 103).<sup>26</sup>

As therapists, we often feel compelled to understand a client as soon as possible, and in the process we are prone to narrowing down options and bypassing data that do not fit our initial assessments. By adopting perspectivalism or in other words a field perspective, our values as therapists need to shift. Since my client and I necessarily and continually have distinct perspectives and experience our sessions differently, a goal such as “being on the same page” will create unnecessary pressure for both the therapist and

the client.

In psychotherapy, perspectivalism implies uncertainty, and this uncertainty cannot be ameliorated. We do not have the safety of an expert's knowledge on what is needed in a particular situation, as was assumed in classical psychoanalysis (Orange, 2010, p. 106). Instead, the therapist needs to look for direction from the relational process between him or her and the client. That is the Gestalt therapy dialogic stance. "Dialogue is a particular kind of conversation... In Dialogue your goal is to listen and inquire, and to support your partner to express him/herself" (Wheeler, 2009, p. 25). When assuming a perspectival attitude, we let understanding emerge, rather than try to "bring it about." By its nature, dialogue is somewhat unpredictable and unstable, because what is understood by either party changes and will need to be revised - and then understood anew. "Knowing in the Cartesian sense, becomes less important than undergoing a process of understanding, making sense, together. Thus our question changes from how do we know each other, to how shall we meet each other" (Jacobs, 2009, p. 52).

## **Conclusion**

It is an arduous process for a scientific theory to become truly relevant in the world of psychotherapy. A transformative process needed to take place for Gestalt therapy field theory to become a cornerstone for the Gestalt theory framework. What we now consider Gestalt therapy field theory has evolved and moved from a theory about electromagnetic forces to a powerful theoretical tool for addressing the enormously complex human world of experience.

The original field concepts were articulated in terms of physics, and some of these general notions have been very helpful for conceptualizing the field perspective in psychology. However, additional developments needed to take place in order for field theory to become useful for the psychotherapeutic theory and practice. The work done by the Gestalt psychologists, which took place almost simultaneously with the developments in physics, brought about many important advances. Among these was the incorporation of human meaning making as a crucial factor for a field perspective. Another important step was Lewin's conceptualization of life space, or phenomenal field (or "situation") as it is often referred to. The phenomenal field notion influenced other Gestalt therapy concepts, and allowed, for example, for a fresh look at the concept of self and helped to articulate the notion of perspectivalism. Additionally, Latner, Parlett, Yontef and others developed principles of field theory as they apply to psychotherapy.

Several basic implications flow from a discussion of field theory. These

include the idea that the field perspective is a way of looking at the physical and the phenomenal world, and that the field concept refers to the notion of interrelatedness and mutual influence of elements within a field. Consequently, a person cannot be understood without an appreciation for his or her total field with both its personal and environmental influences and resources.

Finally, the assumption of a field perspective does not lead to a specific action or to the formulation of a specific technique. However, it can help psychotherapists to develop a stance or an attitude that informs and guides their work.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Dr. Lynne Jacobs and Dr. Gary Yontef, for their invaluable advice and generous support during this project, and Adrina Schulz, my daughter, for her often maddening, but all-important editing work.
2. “Field theory (physics), a theory that explains a physical phenomenon in terms of a field and the manner in which it interacts with matter or with other fields” (wordnetweb.princeton.edu).
3. “Wilhelm Dilthey, Buber’s philosophy teacher in Berlin, had seen the objectivizing methods of the *Naturwissenschaften* (physical sciences) as inadequate to understanding ... in the humanities or *Geisteswissenschaften*” (Orange, 2010, p. 26; italics in the original).
4. A case in point might be the disappearance of the central vanishing point painting technique (CVP) in the early Middle Ages. CVP seemed to have been rejected for hundreds of years by medieval artists in Europe until it was ‘rediscovered’ in the early fifteenth century. It fell out of use because it represented the natural world realistically, as it appears to the physical eye. But it did not depict the ‘actuality’ of an ideal or religious reality – a reality beyond human experience (Goldman, 2007, p.58).
5. Maxwell was able to combine electricity and magnetism in his formulae of the electromagnetic force (Kaku, 1995, p. 21).
6. Max Wertheimer: “... for hours and hours I was fortunate enough to sit with Einstein alone in his study, and hear from him the dramatic developments which culminated in the theory of relativity” (Cited in B. King & Michael Wertheimer, p. 122).
7. Gestalt psychology is not to be confused with the clinical psychotherapy model of Gestalt therapy, which had its beginnings in the 1950’s, although the founders of Gestalt therapy integrated important Gestalt

psychology concepts into their approach.

8. Max Wertheimer (1912). Über das Denken der Naturvölker: I. Zahlen und Zahlgebilde. *Zeitschrift für die Psychologie*, 60, 321-378.
9. An example of a segregated whole might be the perception of a tree as part of a larger landscape. The tree is perceived as a whole, but distinct from other aspects of the environment. The Gestalt of the tree is not put together by assembling individual green/gray/brown visual pixels into a perceivable picture – it is taken in as a whole, against the background of other aspects of the visual field.
10. In Gestalt therapy the term Gestalt has been defined thus: “The word Gestalt (plural: Gestalten) refers to the shape, configuration or whole, the structural entity, that which makes the whole a meaningful unity different from a mere sum of parts” (Yontef, 1993, p. 181).
11. Fritz Perls did allude to field theory already in his first book: *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (1947).
12. Field theory is a way of thinking about and describing phenomena that we encounter in the natural and the phenomenal world. Both, the phenomenal fields and fields as discussed in physics are not a thing in the world, they are processes of meaning making and mapping respectively.
13. “the quantum physicists ... take a philosophical leap and state that reality does not exist without a measurement taking place. In other words, the observational process creates a reality” (Kaku, 1995, p. 47).
14. Including the experience of self, which will be addressed later in this paper.
15. A theory is also subject to field conditions, and will change as its conditions change. For instance, field theory originated in physics, but then transformed due to the specific demands of psychotherapy.
16. For more in depth reading on the way in which field principles were adapted to the practice of psychotherapy, please turn to the writings of Parlett and Yontef (Parlett 2005, ch. 3, p. 41; Yontef 1993, ch. 10, p. 285).
17. The term field is sometimes mistakenly understood as being synonymous with environment. But field does not refer to an aspect or an element. It includes the physiological and psychological processes of a person as well as environmental influences.
18. The term “situation” has also been used to describe the same concept as “life space” and “phenomenal field” (Robine, 2001, pp. 98, 102; Staemmler, 2012 p. 188; Wollant, 2008, pp. 3, 4).
19. The phenomenal field includes both, figure and (back-) ground. The

figure-ground concept entered Gestalt therapy theory through Gestalt psychology, and for Gestalt therapy it has replaced the psychoanalytical concept of the unconscious. “Figure” refers to what is experienced at a present moment, while “ground” pertains to what is outside of current awareness. For instance, I walk along a mountain path and the sound of birds is figural for me. But in the next moment the general quiet that had been background to the birdsong can become the focus of my awareness. Figure-ground is a phenomenological concept and describes the dynamic awareness process. “Ground” does not include the “unpsychological” (Figure 2). At times “field” is confused with the term ground or background as used in Gestalt therapy theory. A salient aspect of field theory is the interconnectedness of different aspects of a field, and figure and ground together form a dynamic process that occurs within a phenomenal field.

20. Köhler already wrote about this aspect of the phenomenal field in 1947 (p. 211), but Staemmler included the concept of “organism” within Lewin’s scheme.
21. Staemmler used the term transphenomenal (2006, p. 70).
22. The dictionary defines category mistakes as follows: “The error of assigning to something a quality or action that can properly be assigned to things only of another category, for example, treating abstract concepts as though they had a physical location” (2005-2007, Version 2.0.3, Apple, Inc.).
23. “However, it is important to note that although Lewin worked with the analogies listed in my previous paragraph he was philosophically well enough educated ... to know that it would be a ‘category-mistake’ ... to think of these two fields as identical in kind. He left no doubt that a physical field differs from a psychological field in essential ways” (Staemmler, 2006, p. 67; italics in the original).
24. Descartes’ philosophy separated the material world and the mind when he described matter as an “extended substance,” and consciousness as a “thinking substance” (Bohm, 1980, p. 249). Yet, the process of experience is part of the larger field process and does not exist separately from the world. Instead it is a factor in the world (Bohm, 1980, p. 67, 257; Köhler, 1947, p. 207,) and part of an explanatory theory that is thoroughly holistic: “a totality of mutually influencing forces that together form a unified interactive whole” (Yontef, 1993, p. 297).
25. Context or Field? Since the field concept is often perplexing, and it is hard to find direct application for it in clinical practice, the term

“context” has sometimes been used in writings on field theory (e.g., Jacobs, 2004, p. 42), in order, I believe, to make the field perspective more “user-friendly”, especially for a non-Gestalt audience. Even though the term context as a stand-in for field has its advantages, such as the general acceptance of the term in the psychological community beyond Gestalt therapy, it is theoretically limited because of its connotation of one-directional environmental influences. For instance, “context” has been used to describe the influence of the environment onto the process of meaning creation, but this usage does not take the meaning making process itself into account. The psychological processes of the experiencing person, for example, are customarily not considered part of the term context: “The circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed” (New Oxford American Dictionary, 2007).

26. Even if in agreement, there are subtle differences, and the patient’s experience will change necessarily with time, à la Heraclitus (Gary Yontef, personal communication, April 2010).

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