Gestalt Groups Revisited:
A Phenomenological Approach

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ABSTRACT

Group therapy, including Gestalt group work, is deeply rooted in group development theories as a principal way of orienting to groups. The author argues that a primarily developmental frame will limit therapists' ability to experience a fuller range of available phenomena. He suggests that therapists broaden their perspective through a grounding in phenomenological field theory. This emphasis on field theory is consistent with the tenets of Gestalt therapy and allows therapists to work in a more relational and experience-near manner.

Introduction

The literature on the subject of group therapy is largely limited to discussions of group development and group process themes. This is no exception in the Gestalt Therapy literature. Models have been proposed that tend to describe normative stages in the life of a group (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Tuckman, 1965; Yalom, 1975) or predictable cycles in group process (Kepner, 1980; Zinker, 1980) and are generally taken by practitioners to be prescriptive. While providing therapists with a clear road map for what to expect when running a group, these models have also been used in ways that limit what therapists are likely to notice in groups. A methodology for attending to what is experience-near in groups would be more in line with the

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practice of Gestalt therapy and may also provide therapists of all theoretical orientations with a richer perspective on groups.

Held in high regard as one of the principal texts on group therapy, Irvin Yalom's *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (1975) has been indispensable among group therapists for decades. His focus on essential therapeutic factors and existential themes as they emerge in groups has helped us orient ourselves to the dynamics of the group encounter with an eye for how groups appear to emerge and develop in unique ways. But what seems to have caught on most about Yalom's work, despite its relatively modest place in the 600-page book, is his discussion of the formative stages of the group (Chapter 11). Yalom's notion that a group is likely to evolve through three predictable stages (***orientation, conflict and cohesion***) has been adopted by many as a veritable instruction manual for "getting a group to develop cohesion", as though this were the optimal state for a group to achieve. Whether or not Yalom intended for this maturational emphasis, the use of these ideas as a prescriptive model for group development privileges certain emergent states over others and potentially limits the group therapist to see only what appears to fit the model and to discard anything marginal or contradictory.

Kepner (1980) also identifies three stages of development (***identity and dependence, influence and counter dependence, and intimacy and interdependence***) which are discussed briefly again in Harman (1984), as well as four distinct contact boundaries which can be accentuated by attending to various levels of system (***individual, dyad, group, and organization***). Melnick (1980) distinguishes between ***individual*** and ***intrapsychic***. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to the ideas of Zinker, Kepner and Melnick as the Cleveland model, which "…integrates the principles and practices of Gestalt therapy and group dynamics" (Kepner, 1980, p. 5). The term "group dynamics" is often invoked as it is here to reference something we all assume to be a given. Group dynamics relate to theories of complex human systems which can, at times, interfere with the attitudes of field theory. Nevertheless, an advantage of the Cleveland model is that it widens our focus, guiding us to look for three processes rather than one. A disadvantage is that we are still looking for something we think we should see (and possibly seeing something we think we should look for). The model relies on spatial metaphors more in line with systems theory than with phenomenological field theory. The underlying assumptions are utopian (aiming for equilibrium and satisfaction) and mechanistic: they help us make sense of events that are obvious and repetitive but fail to encourage an awareness of subtle and unexpected experiences.

Even Zinker's model (1980), which uses a phenomenological construct (the well-known "cycle of experience") as a way to understand each group event, has been used heuristically by many group therapists, as if to track the group's "progress" toward satisfaction and resolution. Despite its

obvious emphasis on the Gestalt formation/destruction process of the group, the model seems to have been introjected by many without much chewing and consequently stays in the foreground, shaping perception into denominations of this experience cycle. Rather than supporting a phenomenological attitude, the unassimilated model gives way to a bias toward "completing the cycle" even at the expense of interesting ambiguities and complexities. What is unfinished becomes problematic. While the experience cycle has been very useful in exploring sequences in contact episodes and the various supports needed for their completion, we may have overlooked the supports needed for holding complexity and tolerating openness. Closure brings a denouement of energy that for most of us spells relief. With this human tendency to fill in the gaps and finish every story, even if prematurely, we may find ourselves shutting out possibilities that would be potentially enlivening, enriching or even essential to survival.

Jon Frew (1988), who thoroughly examined how Gestalt therapy in its first three decades had been practiced in groups, concluded that "[t]he literature of Gestalt therapy would benefit from more written work that defines the possibilities of Gestalt therapy in groups without resorting to lists of over-simplified, all-purpose methods" (p. 93). Not much has been written about groups in the Gestalt literature since then.

I would propose that we return to Gestalt therapy's most fundamental theory and methodology as the ground for practicing group therapy in ways that support both completeness and complexity, both unity and diversity. If indeed a model is what we need, then I propose a model that opens a process of investigation rather than shutting it down with essential classifications. An approach to the practice of group therapy ought to lead the Gestalt therapist to a point of departure without setting the course in advance. Let us begin!

Phenomenological Field Theory and Group

> Field theory is an attitude that permeates Gestalt therapy. It is the lodestone that guides the compass of Gestalt therapy. Field theory is the scientific world view that integrates the fruits of the diverse sources of Gestalt therapy. Field theory makes possible dynamic organizing concepts, such as contact boundary, self as process, etc. It is the cognitive glue that holds the Gestalt therapy system together [Yontef, 1993, p. 324].

At the foundation of our thinking in Gestalt therapy theory we find the core assumptions of field theory. Resting on that foundation are our ideas about how we experience the world, how we come to know what we know.

The question of interest at the moment is, 'What do we know about groups?' What I propose as an alternative to constructing "models" of group practice is that we first situate our questions about groups within the context of the core assumptions of field theory. Furthermore, to answer these questions, I propose that we rely upon the phenomenological method, a method which requires us to order our investigation so that we favor reporting direct experience before moving to generalization. Though we can never completely describe concrete experience without some degree of reflecting, we can assume a position of openness to the relevance of things we judge to be irrelevant. Though we assume that every experience has a context which includes abstract ideas, concepts, beliefs and customs, we can strive to explore how our contexts influence the way we perceive events. Though we cannot apply the phenomenological method purely, we can try to hold a phenomenological attitude.

I start by discussing how core assumptions of field theory may shift our thinking about groups away from a predominantly developmental perspective or from a perspective that idealizes some experiential sequences while problematizing others and toward a paradigm of complexity. I will rely upon several of the characteristics of fields and field theory attitudes as they have been identified by Yontef (1993)[2] in his discussion of phenomenological field theory.

Field Theory Characteristics and Attitudes

A field is a systematic web of relationships. The field is a unitary whole: everything affects everything else. These two characteristics should make us suspicious of simple, linear one-way causality. Influences should be understood as multiple, mutual and complex. Together these influences form a unified interactive whole. The group is a part of that whole and should not be seen merely as a closed, separate system whose events can be studied and understood independent of the whole. The group process is the product of forces interacting in the whole field of which the group is a part. Group dynamics give way to field dynamics.

Let us take as an example how we might think about a group member who has been characterized as "provocative" in the group. A systems approach might consider that group member's provocative behavior to be the function of the group system's self-regulation. The explanation would sound something like this: "The group has become stagnant by virtue of its

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[2] See also John Bernard Harris' treatment of Parlett's Principles of Field Theory in the context of group process (Harris, 1998). However, Harris assumes a reified field and focuses on how things happen more than how we perceive things happening. I make this distinction since my focus is entirely on the phenomenological field.

resistance to change that is essential to its adaptation and survival. The provocateur is being used by the group to reinvigorate and thus incite the group to change." This explanation assigns to the provocateur a function that is useful for the group, despite his own sense of alienation or the disdain others may hold for him. It does not account for other conditions that appear to have nothing to do with group themes but may be having a profound effect on him.

A group development approach might characterize the group member's provocation as symptomatic of the group's 'growing pains', the expected conflict that breaks up the group's superficial pseudomutuality to make for a deeper cohesiveness later on. A group therapist who is interpreting the events in this way might simply accept what is unfolding as a necessary part of the group's growth without exploring any further what other conditions may be having effect.

A field approach would attend to developmental issues as well, but not to the exclusion of other conditions having effect. The field position is more complex, understanding the group member's provocation to be a factor influencing other factors and influenced by other factors in the total field of which the group is a part. Examples of such an understanding are: 1) Cultural contexts, language and action practices, *and recalled historical material* contribute to whether or not each group member perceives the provocation as 'provocative'. 2) The 'provocative' member may himself merely be excited by the possibilities of what could emerge, but based on other variables and past experience he assumes the excitement will overwhelm him and therefore does not find support for it. 3) Other group members expect him to be provocative 'as is his nature' and punitively withdraw supports that might otherwise enable him to tolerate the excitement of potential contact. This is not an exhaustive list of possibilities. There is no end to the list. Our understanding is saturated with references to complex interrelationships. Taking this approach, it is less likely that any one explanation will bully the others into hiding.

A field is continuous in space and time. The field of which the group is a part, and from which every group event emerges, is a continuum. We cannot absolutely pinpoint the boundary of the field (where it ends, where its mutually influencing conditions have no more influence) nor can we locate exactly the boundary between the group and the rest of the field. Furthermore, we cannot with certainty define the boundary between individual group members and the group as a whole. The notion of boundary itself radically shifts. We are not speaking of a line (an infinite series of successive 'points'); we are describing a continuous interconnectedness whose elements cannot be isolated one from the other either in time or in space.

Whereas a systems approach would take as valid and real the notion that the group is bounded, separated from what is outside it, and can therefore be studied as a singular entity with its own self-regulatory functions, a field

approach would magnify the continuities between what appears to be a distinct group and what appears to be its surrounding environment. The notion of a bounded group may be helpful in the field investigation, but only as a temporary measure, analogous to the figure/ground differentiation. When group is foreground, it appears necessarily as separate from its larger environment. Nevertheless, rather than merely admitting the group is embedded in larger systems, the field theorist studies the potentially infinite, interpenetrating and interdependent forces that support the emergence of the figure of 'group'. This opens us up to complex descriptions of events rather than unified explanations that focus on causation.

Phenomena are determined by the whole field. The meaning of any event unfolding in the group process derives from the total situation—from the current phenomenological field. Every manifestation of energy belongs to the whole field. Often, a group therapist will encourage group members not to carry on friendships 'outside' the group because it might contaminate the group process or deflect energy that 'belongs' in the group. If the group were itself the whole field, then it would be accurate to say that the energy belongs to the group. *Everything is of-a-field.* But the group itself is not the whole field; otherwise, we would not be able to differentiate it from the background of our experience. When we are studying a group, the group is a part of our foreground and so "exists phenomenologically as a part of a phenomenologically determined field" (Yontef, 1993, p. 302). The events we experience in this context must be defined in terms of the whole field, not merely in terms of the group purpose, its history, its membership, or its mission.

A subtle ignorance of these field theory characteristics can happen when we give ourselves license to investigate a group 'as if' it were enclosed by or independent of the whole field. This is the case even with a complex adaptive systems approach which assumes the group is nesting in wider systems which themselves are nesting in even wider systems and that the group contains within it other smaller systems in which are nesting even smaller systems. Admittedly, it can be helpful to circumscribe that part of our phenomenological field which seems to 'contain' the group. But this circumscription is a construct which is ultimately the result of our need to investigate what is contained within it. We might also decide to study the complex relationships arising between people over 6 feet tall and the multiple factors affecting their height. If this were the case, we would circumscribe a very different part of our phenomenological field in which we could grasp more easily the specific ways those interrelationships are organized. What is foreground is related to what we are interested in seeing.

The Cleveland model relies on the support provided by the systems paradigm but it also allows for greater complexity by guiding our investigation toward multiple processes at work simultaneously within the system. Therapists are encouraged to accentuate various contact boundaries

that correspond to various levels of system (Melnick, 1980). I consider these levels of system to be like lenses that support a focus on distinct but interacting processes. I like this shift away from singular to multiple foci and the attention to simultaneously interacting processes. But I think we can go even further with this. I think the complexity of groups is not limited to three or four levels. When relying primarily on a systems paradigm for studying groups we are really forced to limit those levels to the obvious: intraorganismic systems, organismic systems, interpersonal systems, organizational systems. But perhaps a field approach (which allows for the systems model as one perspective from which the group can be studied) can increase the potential foci to a much larger number, opening the investigation to conditions of the field that we have either taken for granted or never before acknowledged.

Perceived reality is configured by the relationship between observer and observed. The experience of an event is not identical with what some may believe to be the actuality, the objective reality. The events we experience are coconstituted by the interaction between stimuli and our reflections on them. What we examine, what we study or experience, is emergent from that interaction. What we believe to be an actual group is an experience of an interaction. Some phenomenologists would argue that "'[o]thers', like 'objects', are clearly existentially independent of our inter-subjective constructions of them. However, like objects, what others really are in themselves remain unknown" (Spinelli, 1989, p. 72). I would reassert this idea in relation to groups. What groups really are in themselves remain unknown to us, despite our propensity to classify their properties.

This radically shifts our assumptions about what we observe as group therapists. If I see what I see because I am *here* to see it, I cannot be certain that any other therapist nearby would also see the same phenomenon. If I feel the urge to check that out with another therapist, I am assuming I can translate what I observed sufficiently so that she will grasp the phenomenon in the same way that I have grasped it. But in fact she would have to have been present in the exact same way that I was present to experience the same phenomenon. Nobody can inhabit my own perspective exactly. The best I can do is to check out with others who are present—especially the group members themselves—whether their experiences approximate mine and, if so, how we make meaning of that.

A potential barrier to holding this field theory attitude is the habit we have as group therapists to see what is happening as examples of an already given and expected principle or rule. And not only this, but also the habit we have of persuading others—the group members—to see this in the same way. An example of such a habit would be to read conflict as an expression of the group's 'appropriate' and 'timely' developmental strivings and to explain it thus to the group rather than investigating the conditions giving rise to this specific conflict as it is unfolding in this specific time and place. The attitude

that considers reality as coconstituted by observer and observed would shift our thinking to a place of less certainty and more curiosity. For example, "Is this a conflict? What's happening right now? What are people saying to each other? What are people wanting or needing?"

The Principle of Contemporaneity. Current field conditions may include a group member's recalled past and anticipated future, but it is the processes of recalling and anticipating which are having effect in the present situation. What is actually happening currently is of the current field and has some influence on the whole situation. Group members can become aware of these conditions and make adjustments if needed.

A developmental approach might explain what appears to be high cohesiveness as a 'result' of the completion of earlier stages in the group's development (i.e., orientation and conflict). A field approach would assume that the forces responsible for the group's cohesiveness are simultaneously present with that cohesiveness, not merely precipitating it. How group members are recalling or reinterpreting their earlier experiences of orienting or struggling with conflict are likely having some effect on how the group is interacting in the current situation, but the earlier experiences themselves cannot be considered causal in relation to the emergence of the group's current cohesiveness.

Even the Gestalt 'cycle of experience' has been used to explain the way events typically unfold in group. For example, the therapist observes what appears to be confluence among group members and explains this confluence as a result of an earlier avoidance of more aggressive contacting through exploration and differentiation. Now we might argue that the earlier 'avoidance' kept the group from creating conditions sufficient for the emergence of later supports for sharper, more textured contact. But there are other forces influencing the conditions now. If we merely explain the confluence (or what appears to be confluence) as a function of the group's avoidance, then we are closing down awareness to the potential influences here and now which beg for the group's attention. For example, the group is not talking about an absent member who suffers from a terminal illness. If we explain the group's avoidance as a defense against grief, we risk ignoring other factors at work, such as the quality of relationship which does not support the possibility of dealing with the loss, or the preoccupation of other group members with pressing concerns of their own which reserve their available energy from other group issues. Here is the classic mistake of assuming that when you are not 'in contact with me', you are 'avoiding me', or 'in withdrawal'. What is more likely is that you are in contact with something else entirely even when you appear to me to be withdrawn. Becoming silent or going into one's head is also contact with something.

Process: everything is becoming. The group's experience is emergent rather than fixed. The group is of a field that is "newly constructed moment by moment" (Parlett, 1991, p. 72) so that any one group encounter cannot be

duplicated. Rather than see only the continuity of group process as it unfolds over time, the therapist must also relate specifically to "this" group process as it is emerging here and now without attempting to predict its trajectory. If we are tracking our concrete experience as it unfolds, we are reconstructing our knowledge of phenomena continuously.

Taking this attitude, the therapist avoids characterizing the group, attending instead to what the group is becoming or how the group is changing over time. A developmental model would direct our attention similarly but with an assumption that the group moves toward greater cohesiveness as it 'grows'. The attitude of field theory accepts that the group may become something other than cohesive and that this 'becoming' is a wise one given the current field conditions. The key here is to investigate what conditions are having effect in the current situation such that disorganization might be the wisest development of that group. The attitude restores our curiosity about what *is* at a moment when we are tempted to nudge things along to where we think things *ought to be*.

At the same time, what *is* is only what emerges in a given time and place. What *will be next* will be—must be—different from what is. Of course, the differences may be so subtle that we are barely able to notice them. When this is the case, we often orient ourselves to enduring themes, stable characteristics, essential qualities. These are tendencies supported by certain conditions that emerge repetitively in similar but not identical fashion such that the group appears to have certain enduring features. Some of this repetition can be accounted for by the limits on what is possible in certain contexts. We might refer to these limits as rules or laws. For example, the group members tend to stay on the ground and not float in the air. Given the context of the environment (i.e., earth) and the absence of extremely unusual factors (e.g., explosions, earthquakes, tornados), we can predict that the group members will stay on the ground. Or, if they choose to engage in leaping, we can predict that they will return to the ground.

The remainder of the repetition can be accounted for by less obvious 'laws' or governing principles which shape the possibilities into tendencies. These are not as extreme as the limits discussed above (e.g., gravity). But they do give some significant shape to what will happen in a group. I return once again to the example of group development from conflict to cohesiveness. Developmental theorists claim that groups tend to develop in this way. So this means that we are less likely to see a group develop from cohesiveness to conflict. And if we think we are seeing that very thing happen, we might decide we are looking incorrectly because we take this claim to be a sort of law about what is possible (like gravity). But how do we know whether the claim is valid? By what method can we determine if this kind of development varies from group to group, culture to culture, age to age?

Insight into genotypic invariants. This is the final field theory attitude that shifts our thinking about groups. It shifts our thinking because we are not used to thinking without logical deduction. We are not meant simply to guess or to deduce an invariant (permanent and essential) quality by virtue of reason or logic. We follow instead the guidelines of the phenomenological method to get insight into how a field is organized and subsequently identify by rigorous clarification and confirmation what is consensual and generalized in our experience. The guidelines for this method are the subject of the following section.

The Phenomenological Method

The use of the phenomenological method in groups will look not significantly different from its use in other contexts. It involves following the rules of the method, and I choose to follow the rules as defined by Ernesto Spinelli (1989): a) the rule of *epoché*; b) the rule of description; and c) the rule of horizontalization.

The group therapist who is following the rule of *epoché* will add an openness to her immediate experience so that any interpretations that may follow will be loose, reversible, and therefore more adequate. Any held assumptions, biases, beliefs that interfere with this openness should be held 'lightly'. Some phenomenologists call this practice 'bracketing'. It is important not to confuse this idea with the notion of eliminating or controlling for bias. Bias cannot be controlled enough. But it can be acknowledged, and its effects can be tracked as long as one is open to that kind of awareness. The brackets around assumptions and biases might be understood as brackets we put around important words or phrases in a text. Brackets are used in the literary context to enclose a portion of text not merely for the purpose of eliminating it. One might just as easily delete from the main text what should be eliminated. But the brackets signify that the text could be read 'as if' what they enclose is not necessary. It is as if the author is saying to the reader, "Be open to what the text might be saying 'without' what I have enclosed in brackets."

It is precisely this kind of openness that the group therapist should attempt with regard to the various theories, models, assumptions and values that hold sway in our thinking about groups. The methodology is itself awareness. When there is the urge to eliminate in our thinking certain possibilities in favor of others, we must attempt to bracket what remains so that we will still be open to the other possibilities later on. For example, I observe two group members in what appears to be a conflict. Before I move into making meaning of the 'conflict' in relation to the larger group, I should bracket even the assumption that what I am observing is, in fact, conflict. What am I actually observing in my immediate experience? Mary and Bob are speaking to each other in a loud voice. No, the voices are only loud relative to the other voices I have heard so far. No, the voices are louder than

I am comfortable hearing. Mary and Bob look angry. No, their faces appear tense, rigid, flushed. Their eyes appear close, penetrating, focused. I am aware of heat rushing up the sides of my face. My heart rate is elevated. I have lost my gauge for what else is happening in the room. Up until now, others have seemed quiet, still, emptied. Are they?

What I have just been engaging in is an attempt at following the rule of description. I am focused on the most immediate variables of my subjective experience rather than explanations of those variables. The more concrete is my focus, the more straightforward the experience. The more abstract is my focus, the more reflective the experience. Concrete and abstract are on a continuum. I can never be completely concrete in my focus, nor can I achieve pure abstraction. I can only move toward one or the other extreme.

Now I take a deep breath. I relax the muscles in my neck and shoulders. I turn my head from side to side and my eyes begin to scan the room. I see some more of what is happening around me. Some of the others are looking back at me with wide eyes. Some are staring down at the floor. Some are gazing diligently at Mary and Bob.

What are my options at this point? Do I have the information I need in order to offer the support the group is looking for? Does the group in fact need any more support than is already available? I myself need more information. I decide to ask, "What are people experiencing right now?" A complex chain of events begins to unfold. Some group members have already decided they know what is happening and why. Others are confused. Bob and Mary are now quiet, stiff. What do I focus on first? What is most important or most relevant to the group process? What can I afford to ignore?

The rule of horizontalization (or the equalization rule) directs me not to ignore anything at this point. Of course, by 'anything' I mean whatever I have become aware of so far. The number of things I could possibly attend to is unlimited, but if something has occurred to me, I should be especially careful not to ignore it. Everything I sense is potentially relevant to how the Gestalt is organized. So I decide not to determine for the group what is relevant and what is not. I stay with my open stance. I state clearly what I am directly aware of. I hear one group member explaining why Mary and Bob are in battle, and I respond by saying, "So you have an explanation for what you are experiencing." Another group member appears to be very quiet and withdrawn, so I ask, "Lori, I notice how still and quiet you are. Do you want to say anything about that?" Mary eventually pipes up with an objection, "I don't appreciate being interrupted. We were in the middle of something here." I respond to Mary, "You experienced my questions as interference and you have some feelings about that. What are you feeling?"

Mary tells me she is angry with me. How have I contributed to this? Have I made a mistake? Perhaps by attending to the possibilities, I have not met her fully in what she needs. Should I have planned differently? Would another choice have been more supportive of Mary? But here I am now,

having made the choices I made, with no possibility of revising them. Here I am now, responsible for the choices I made. What do I do with that? I need Mary to know I take responsibility for my part. I tell her, "I wasn't as attentive to you as I could have been. I missed you." But this is not all that I can say. I add, "And I feel torn—drawn both to your needs and feelings and also to what others are needing and feeling."

The process would continue until there was a growing consensus about what has taken place, even if that consensus is a unanimous acknowledgement that everyone has seen and felt something different. The consensus may be the acceptance of our diversity. Or perhaps there are some unifying themes in what we have been through together. Even so, whatever unity we perceive, there is endless complexity that surrounds it. The phenomenological method guides us toward an ever increasing appreciation of that complexity.

'Grounds' for Dialogue

I have argued that the phenomenological attitude nourishes an appreciation for complexity. Another potential consequence of the phenomenological attitude is the creation of conditions necessary for dialogue[3]. I propose that in creating dialogic conditions, we increase the potential for both satisfaction and growth. To illustrate this idea, I will need to define a few terms, starting with the concept of "ground".

Ground Zero

In any Gestalt, the ground is what is in dynamic relation to the emergence of the figure. The ground is fundamentally all the forces of a field that are interacting in such a way that make possible the emergence of a figure. So, in visual perception for instance, ground represents those conditions which make it possible for any given visual figure to be "visible", such as the darkness of the sky which makes it possible for us to see a star. In auditory perception, ground might be the silence which makes it likely that we will hear the faint sound of a pin dropping, or it might be the continuously played chord that allows us to hear in music the harmony of a series of single notes. In motor behavior, ground represents the forces interacting in the current field which make it possible for graceful movement. It might be the actual ground, the earth upon which it is possible for us to walk. Or it might be the water that allows us to float and tread and swim, all movements we would otherwise not be capable of doing in the air close to the earth. Notice

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[3] Note that my use of the term dialogue is specific to the meaning made by Martin Buber and further elucidated by Richard Hycner and Lynne Jacobs (1996). I am not referring to a verbal conversation or debate. I am referring to the conditions of presence, inclusion and commitment that support the emergence of the *I-Thou* relation. See also Yontef (1993) for a brief description of these conditions.

though what happens as the ground shifts from the air close to the earth to the atmosphere far from the earth. Gravity, a name for certain conditions influencing the likelihood that we will be earthbound and not hovering above the street, relaxes its grip and movement becomes swim-like in outer space. In all these examples, ground is what makes the figure possible.

It is in the ground that we find supports for contacting. When we speak of *supported* contact—contact that clarifies and sharpens in awareness—that which supports the contact is part of the ground. The ground is there in relation to what is figural. Our only access to the ground is through forming figures. We cannot attend to the ground. Awareness presupposes figure formation. If I think I'm seeing "the ground", then I have, in fact, organized my perception into some part of the field which I am calling "the ground" but which is actually a figure (and probably somewhat abstract). The ground is what is not figural but is nevertheless influencing the emergence of the figure. Its influence is understood implicitly but impossible to articulate without changing the configuration.

The figure is always determined by the perspective of the experiencing subject. It is often tempting to refer to group processes as events that are happening "for the group". For example, the therapist might reflect that the group was really dealing with a lot of anger during its last meeting. This would, of course, summarize the therapist's experience which would be considered to be a very important perspective given her clinical judgment and expertise. However, it is still the therapist's perspective and therefore the therapist's figure. We cannot say that every experiencing subject who participated in that group would have the same figure. We can merely point out the evidence that supports *the idea* that the group was dealing with a lot of anger. We often leave out the evidence out of respect for the experience and judgment of the therapist, who, we assume, has based her conclusion on more than a mere hunch.

In perception, someone is here to perceive something… and not in a neutral or passive way. There can be no possibility of awareness without some need or interest energizing and organizing perceptions. The perceiver wants something. The differentiation of any figure from its ground is charged by desire. The aliveness of the human organism accounts for the vividness of the perception. Without the organism's vitality and aggression, nothing would sharpen in an otherwise chaotic and confluent phenomenological field. It takes energy to organize those chaotic elements of the field into a meaningful configuration. It is the aggression of the organism (its desires and appetites) that divides the lively figure *of interest* from an otherwise uninteresting background. The sharper the differentiation of figure and ground, the more aggression has been mobilized. The more aggression is mobilized, the more stable the ground is made, as though the aggression is used to sequester the elements of the ground and suppress their figure-like potentialities for a time.

The organizing effects of aggression will become more relevant later in this discussion.

This is the good news. When I need something, I don't get bogged down in irrelevant details. I find what is relevant to my needs, let everything recede into the ground, and move toward satisfaction. At times I may have competing needs motivating my choices (e.g., the need for nourishment complicated by the need for safety), in which case I perceive what is relevant to this competition. Perception is an exquisitely efficient process. In Gestalt theory, we have our principle of *Prägnanz*. There is a logic and an aesthetic in the way our experience is organized—configured into figure and ground—given the available resources of the current field. There is a *Prägnanz* to the needs I have and the manner in which I attempt to satisfy them. But we should not confuse what is logical or aesthetic for me with "the greater good". Culture clearly influences whether or not my needs are deemed worthy of satisfaction in the context of a group. Is individual satisfaction valued above all else? Or does the complexity of multiple perspectives also offer something useful to the individual beyond the mere satisfaction of his needs?

If a group is run in such a way that each individual's needs are considered and prioritized according to some hierarchy of urgency, then the group is merely reasserting the role of society as a support for the satisfaction of individual needs. If, however, there is some value to a heightened awareness of my needs in relation to yours *on our way to satisfying some of them*, then the group therapist has many opportunities to pursue this value. What I am suggesting is not merely a Puritanical postponement of satisfaction for the sake of denying relief or pleasure. The suggestion is to find the proper pace, the right balance of support and frustration that will engage group members in some curiosity about and experimentation with "others" while also encouraging and soothing where necessary. I believe the challenge for the therapist is to discover the "necessary" supports rather than merely default to the "available" ones.

In a culture that promotes individual success and gratification, the individual will "vie" for resources and use his aggression to secure them. It is no surprise that we have tended to focus on how groups can help individuals satisfy their needs and soothe their anxieties. Yet Gestalt therapy has been concerned primarily with growth, a process which requires varying degrees of discomfort, disorganization and disorientation to allow for increasingly more refined organizations of experience. Supporting sharper figures by extinguishing anxiety related to confusion and disorientation may not always be in line with our value of growth. Increasing our appreciation for diversity and complexity at the very least affords us more opportunities to experience the "satisfaction" of discovering the novelty of our differences.

Common Ground

I have said quite a lot about competing needs, a condition which presupposes that one individual will need something different from another. Our needs are different as our fields are different. Our contexts are also different, though they certainly can overlap. But we also share quite a bit in common as fellow human beings, feeling similar needs, perceiving similar events, all shaped by shared contexts. "Our phenomenological fields are … shared fields, despite their uniqueness. This ranges from the most abstract communality of shared language, culture and various 'forms of life,' as Wittgenstein described, but also more directly, in that my being-in-your-world and your being-in-my-world yields co-constituted and broadly overlapping fields. This is the most basic inclusion" (Jacobs, 2003, p. 5).

I reference Jacobs at this point to underscore the fact, at times oddly forgotten, that a group is a "meeting" of persons. The dialogic process to which Lynne Jacobs consistently points us is an orientation to something beyond a mere mutual equilibration of needs among people. Yes, admittedly, meeting the other involves some degree of using, relying upon, objectifying the other. This is unavoidable and often quite valuable and even beautiful (e.g., sexual love between partners or the dependence of a child on his caregiver). But this *alone* is not true meeting. In fact, meeting the other is often not the most aesthetic aspect of the dialogue. Sometimes we discover each other in shock, confusion, disappointment, even horror. The *I-Thou* moment often occurs unplanned and without notice. By the time we notice what has happened, it has already eluded us. When we are attempting to track our direct experience, we are relating still to our interpretations (what Buber would call the *I-It*). But we make the assumption that we are, in fact, in the presence of others and affected by them. Your actuality may be ineffable, but I have faith that you are there and I am here and we impact each other.

If, for the sake of a group experiment, we were to hold each other as partners in dialogue, I believe we would both complicate and enrich our individual awareness processes. We would no longer limit our search merely to supports for clean, sharp figures (*I-It)*. We would expand our search to include as well other field conditions that may at first create static, chaos, disorientation, even dread but that are necessary for the later emergence of potentially satisfying contacts with "others" (*I-Thou*). Here is the continuous tension of the polarity of unity and complexity. In order to sharpen figures, we make the total situation into a still, quiet ground and a lively, vivid figure. In this way, we achieve clarity and unity. Whatever the figure is, we can orient to it well and know how to move in relation to it. But there is also a value to destabilization, especially if we are in the business of growing. Without some destabilizing conditions, novel attempts to reorient oneself will be unnecessary and unlikely. We would have relief but without the motivation to reach for something new.

So how does the therapist help the group to find this balance of unity and complexity? I think it would first be important to explain how a therapist does not help. I offer this example. A therapist listens as group members give expression to their here-and-now experience. This is not an uncommon process in Gestalt groups. Of the ten group members, six speak. Of the six who speak, four describe an experience of aliveness, energy, vitality. Each of them uses slightly different words with subtly different nuances (e.g., "I feel really 'awake' today"; "I've got butterflies in my stomach"). Of the remaining two who have spoken, one describes a discomfort that is vague and unfocused and the other describes a peaceful calm. After this 5 minute exploration, the group therapist exclaims: "So the group is excited! Let's stay with that."

Now, aside from the fact that two of the six members who have spoken did not endorse the experience of 'excitement', there still remain another four group members who have said *nothing*. Perhaps they have expressed something non-verbally that the group therapist has noticed and has interpreted to be a message of being excited. This is possible, but in any case it would be the kind of guess best checked out directly with the other group members. The most likely explanation for the therapist's comment is that the therapist leapt from her own figure of "Some people are excited" to an assumption that "The group is excited." I propose that this leap is costly. It requires a collapsing of the complexity surrounding it. It also disenfranchises the experiences of those group members for whom the statement "The group is excited" does not fit. The "others" have been marginalized—literally, transformed into the margins that give shape to the therapist's text.

Certainly, some group members may notice what the therapist has suppressed and may even confront her about it. Or perhaps the confrontation cannot find its support in the current conditions. But the point is that any claim the therapist makes to knowing the group as a whole had better be grounded in a thorough investigation of the conditions available to awareness. And given the wealth of possibilities in a group, any comments about what the therapist "knows" should be complex and inclusive enough to represent the fullest possible flavor of the moment. When they are not, a leap has been taken that ignores ambiguity and diversity.

Why leap? I'm reminded of the conundrum of the Law of Halves. If we're moving along our course from sensation to awareness to action to satisfaction, measuring the pace of that movement would require some sense of how far we have to go before we're "satisfied". Surely movement is required to make that happen. But how much? And at what rate? And for whose satisfaction? Mine? Yours? Ours? I can see us plotting our course along a line by cutting the distance between here and there in half, and then cutting it in half again, and then again, and again…forever! At some point, we will have to leap out of the plotting and just dive in. All the while, our

excitement builds as we're pulled toward the aliveness and brightness of the figure.

Of course, we cannot endure the buildup of excitement ad infinitum, nor should we try since this would ultimately interrupt contact with potential nourishment. But if we set as our objective to appreciate *as fully as possible* the textures and dimensions of the total situation, we might have to stay with the excitement longer than we would if we merely filled in the gaps once we saw the beginnings of a simple pattern. Contact with novelty "excites". To stay with complexity is to stay with excitement, a sometimes daunting task. So to return to the original question of how the therapist helps the group maintain some balance of unity and complexity, I would suggest that the therapist develop a value for both. This will require a greater tolerance for her own anxiety and disorientation.

Ground Breaking

Where there is difficulty with the environment (i.e., where creative adjustment between organism and environment is especially complex) the satisfaction is delayed and awareness is required. It is the *delay* that I am especially interested in. The delay is a function of time. Time passes between the experience of needing and the experience of satisfaction. What would otherwise be a seamless unity of needing and needed has now been differentiated into two experiences separated by time. The delay is also a function of space. The organism perceives a span of distance between the needing and the needed, as though they are in two different locales. The organism is excited, but now the excitement must be born for a period of time while necessary investigations and adaptations are made. The separation of need and needed demands movement to close the gap, and movement requires energy and supports. To act under these circumstances would not be a mere impulse; it would be aware, deliberate, thoughtful.

During the challenging adjustment, the "bearing" of mounting excitement is in itself yet another challenge. Not only do we require support for reaching, grasping and moving despite difficulty, but we also require support for tolerating the excitement of the unmet need during this period of investigation and deliberation. For example, if I am afraid and am looking for a safe hiding place, it is critical that I evaluate the conditions well to establish whether a particular place of hiding is really safe. Ironically, I may come into contact with more potential danger in my search for safety. If these adjustments are difficult, even more awareness is needed. Contact with "more" also requires movement—the use of motor functions to scan for possible contacts with other parts of the total situation. If I am gripped by my fear, I may hold my breath and paralyze myself, interfering with supports for contacting that safe hiding place I am looking for. Instead, I play dead, perhaps so that the perpetrator of danger will assume I am of no threat and pass without harming me. Whatever adjustment I make, some investigation of

the current field conditions may be required for optimal creativity. If I leap without looking, I may be forced to shut down entirely.

If a group member gets frustrated or anxious, it will be tempting for him to reach for something immediately to relieve the tension. He may not even see what others are needing. Frankly, he's probably not interested. His level of excitement has been raised beyond what he believes he can handle. His need for relief energizes his perceptions of others either as potential solutions or as barriers. From his current perspective, he will not appreciate the complexity of his situation. His perspective limits his possibilities for contacting. His perspective has a 'horizon'. The very idea that any good may come from his frustration lies beyond that horizon. Lynne Jacobs suggests that perspectival horizons are shaped by contexts, "such that certain realms of knowledge or understanding lie at the edges of, or even outside of, our lived contexts…" (2003, p. 8). She goes on to say that "it is only through such experiences as confusion, surprise, a sense of nonsense, that our horizons may expand. This becomes possible through dialogue" (ibid.). Though we may need relief and gratification, we also need to be surprised by each other's differences so as to expand the range of possibilities for more satisfying contacts. The old adages "Good things come to those who wait" and "Two heads are better than one" appear to have some synergy.

In a group, there are many dialogical partners. To hold each other in dialogue, we are challenged to include each other, to appreciate our different perspectives. A multiplicity of perspectives increases the number of potential perturbations to the most economical Gestalt formation. The more surprises, the more our horizons expand. Indeed, one might have the impulse to oversimplify and leap over the confusion as a way of coping with building tensions. And, as pointed out earlier, leap we must do, for it is unavoidable. But leaping *too quickly* may overlook the advantages of trafficking in so many resources. Finding more and different contacts may yield more resources and supports and ultimately increase the possibilities for satisfaction. Again, I am not suggesting that we never zero in on anything in a group. I am encouraging the group therapist to wait *a few moments longer* to take in the bigger picture.

Existential phenomenologists argue that "the realization that there is no known 'fixedness' in others, nor even in our perception of others, leads us (both through this conclusion itself and in its even more seemingly dreadful implications) to experience an overwhelming anxiety. Faced with such, we deny our very awareness of our conclusion and seek to reassert our previous position" (Spinelli, 1989, p. 74). If we reassert what is familiar as a way of coping with the anxiety triggered by what is confusingly novel, then we risk impoverishing our own bountiful worlds of the very resources we might cultivate to help us make more creative adjustments. Anxiety is not merely something to eliminate. It is a sign of excitement demanding more support:

> Novelty implies temporality. With the passage of time and, possibly, with the lessening of the anxiety that externally imposed novelties induce, the novelty may become accepted, even highly valued, and itself become part of a new sedimented framework. Novelty which results from one's own insights or active search is more likely to produce exhilaration than anxiety. In this case, the novelty is likely to be more quickly accepted and treated as having significance equal to if not greater than any pre-insight standpoints [ibid, p. 52].

Hitting the Ground Running

Increased complexity yields increased creativity. Spinelli defines creativity as the "ability to see what is not usually seen, to form unusual connections between seemingly disparate events" (1989, p. 53). Such an ability develops through the transcendence of fixed configurations of figure and ground. *Apodicticity*, the ability to return again and again to a previous perception in order to fulfill a previous claim, anchors our experience enough that we are free to approach a broader perception: "Phenomenologically, the greater the number of apodictic possibilities, the more adequate is our perception" (1989, p. 53). *Ascendancy* is the position from which one is capable of seeing a figure/ground in its various reversals (e.g., the faces and the vase, the old woman and the young woman, the hallway and the pyramid). Spinelli argues that the ascendant position increases the likelihood of more apodictic possibilities, and thus increases the adequacy of perception (not the veracity or validity). What he calls the 'polymorphic-mindedness' of the subject in the ascendant position "seems central to what is usually referred to as 'creativity'…. [I]t is precisely this ability … that is the basis to all acts of creation, be they artistic or scientific" (p. 53).

Creativity allows for an appreciation of many perspectives, an appreciation that is a prerequisite of dialogue. My reference to Spinelli's discussion serves to lay some groundwork for the idea that we actually need creativity in order to increase the adequacy of our perceptions of complexity, while we also need complexity (the possibility of multiple and reversible figures) to promote creativity. Spinelli is drawing a connection between ascendancy (the condition of being loosened from a *sedimented* position) and creativity.

> For the moment, it is enough to point out once again how real-life 'breaks' in sedimented perspectives allow us to be creative, to make discoveries both startling and mundane. In playing with the possible reversal of figure/ground, in realigning dominant and recessive

> features, in exploring new possible connections, we
> might conceivably produce revolutionary paradigm
> shifts [Spinelli, 1989, p. 57].

He further implies that it is our *willingness* to assume the phenomenological attitude that "expands our experience, opens us to the experiences of others, allows us to lessen the power of personal and cultural sedimented perspectives" (ibid).

Well, if it is a question of willingness, then we have some choice in the matter. We can opt for more adequate perception by aspiring to the ascendant position. We can develop our perceptual range by practicing the phenomenological method. We can **learn** how to reverse figure and ground.

> In order for any active viewer to carry out this
> particular kind of object viewing, we have seen that a
> suspension of sedimented beliefs via the
> phenomenological method is required. In suspending
> such beliefs, according to Husserl, we have 'switched'
> from a natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude
> [Spinelli, 1989, p. 54].

Since, in Gestalt therapy, we have a tradition of measuring health according to the maximum capacity for creative adjustment, it seems only logical that we incorporate that tradition into our thinking about groups. If we merely adopt other group work frameworks on the basis that they have been well developed or widely received, we have not necessarily been consistent with our theory. I can imagine a 'cohesive' group, for instance, which is not tolerant of difference or complexity. In fact, tolerating difference may require significant levels of disorganization for some groups. I can imagine a group which attends to various levels of system but which ignores other factors that could be having effect on the group. While group members may master the skill of adjusting for the sake of alleviating tension or satiating hunger, these adjustments will surely be more conservative than creative. They will be aimed at the equilibration of dissonance. And equilibrium is sometimes the optimal state. But this is not always the case, especially when what is needed is to reach something new, to grow, to learn. We look for supports for the most creative adjustments: creativity transcends cohesiveness.

Final Thoughts

I have attempted to lay out an argument for practicing a greater degree of openness in working with groups. I believe this openness is necessary to counterbalance the narrow focus that seems to have evolved in our attempts to

define group development and process themes. Assuming attitudes of field theory and using the phenomenological method can lead to other possibilities, including the development of diverse perspectives and supports for greater creativity. Rather than starting from an idea about how groups work and aiming at helping groups work in that way, the phenomenological approach gives us license to let our theories of group therapy receded into the background where they can more appropriately support rather than dominate us. The idea is not to abandon what we already know; that knowledge is the ground on which we stand. The challenge is to look toward what we do not know and to make new meanings together.

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