Who (in the World) Wants to Work?
The International Persistence of Gestalt Psychotherapy

A Review of

*Gestalt Therapy Around the World*
by Eleanor O’Leary (Ed.)

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Reviewed by

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When I reflect upon Gestalt psychotherapy theory, the immediate images that spring to mind are those from films of the iconic Fritz Perls demonstrating Gestalt group psychotherapy. As he maniacally chain smokes, he keeps asking the question, “Who wants to work?” I have always puzzled over Gestalt therapy. Is it a bona fide theory of personality and psychotherapy? Is it based solely on the cult of personality of Perls? Isn’t it really a set of therapeutic techniques rather than a comprehensive theory of psychotherapy? What happens to a school of psychotherapy when its founder dies? Perhaps even more poignantly, what happens to a school of psychotherapy after the first generation of clinicians trained by the founders die?

Historically in 2014, the psychological world is at this point. Many of the first generation of Perls-trained clinicians have retired or died. So, does Gestalt therapy have a future, and is there applicability beyond the cultural borders of the United States? In a recent survey, Norcross and Rogan (2013) found that, among members of the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Division 29 who responded, 4 percent ascribed to a Gestalt theoretical orientation. It is interesting to note that this is an increase from previous surveys: in 2001, 1.5 percent; in 1991, 2 percent; and in 1981, 3 percent.

What is the state of Gestalt therapy currently from an international perspective? This is the question that *Gestalt Therapy Around the World* seeks to answer. In the book, authors from numerous countries respond to a series of questions related to Gestalt practice in their respective countries. The answers cover the history of the practice in the country, the existence of Gestalt associations, training perspectives, contributions to the development of Gestalt theory, Gestalt-related research that was produced in the country, and future challenges facing Gestalt psychotherapy in the country. The final product is a fascinating set of postcards from around the globe detailing the current status of Gestalt practice.
The book, edited by Eleanor O’Leary, begins with several chapters designed to educate the reader on the basics of Gestalt theory and practice. For my taste, this section of the book does not succeed as well as other attempts to explain Gestalt theory to the uninitiated. For a superior overview, see Yontef and Jacobs (2013). Still, it is an engaging book to read.

Related to the question of whether Gestalt will persist after the death of Perls and the retirement or death of the second-generation Gestaltists, it is fascinating to see the same struggle being played out in multiple cultural contexts. A fascinating point made by the book is the possibility that the death of Gestalt psychotherapy may come not from the passing of its originators but from market forces such as managed health care.

The threat posed to Gestalt by a managed health care system brings up the intriguing juxtaposition of polarities faced by Gestalt practitioners. Should a system of therapy that was created in a rebellious anarchistic manner now dance within the stringent world of managed health care? Related to this issue is the professionalization process that is occurring in many international contexts.

The first implication of this professionalization process is the requirement that mental health practitioners become licensed and accredited. A second implication of this professionalization process is the move of the locus of training from institutes to universities. The suggestion is made that this move is necessary and to not do so will result in the eventual death of Gestalt practice in the specific country. The case study of Ireland is presented. Here the move to a university-based setting was successful, and many clinicians were trained in the Gestalt method, but upon the retirement of the training director (the editor of the book), the program folded.

Another polarizing battle that Gestalt practitioners face is the issue of research. My stereotype of European psychologists is that they are much more sophisticated than their American counterparts when the issue is theory and theory development, but when it comes to empirical research, they are sorely lacking. Unfortunately, this stereotype is reinforced in much of the book. Although there are a few shining examples of strong empirical research that has been carried out related to Gestalt, these are the exceptions. Much of the research discussion relates to case studies and qualitative research. I fondly recall my recently deceased mentor Joe Rychlak making the point throughout his career that embracing a humanistic theoretical orientation does not mean that one has to reject the empirical research method (Rychlak, 1988). There is such a thing as a rigorous humanist!

It is interesting to think of how Perls would respond to these polarizing forces. His theory suggests that a creative individual could independently and in a free-flowing manner switch to a new side of the polarity if the context has changed, and indeed the context across the globe has changed.

A critical point that is lacking in the book is an examination of the assumption that Gestalt practice is apparently value-free and not emanating from and validating a specific worldview. Indeed, some of the techniques in Gestalt reflect a very specific American, individualistic culture that values catharsis, personal responsibility, a present-time orientation, and self-disclosure. Surely, Gestalt therapy needs to be deconstructed in other cultural contexts and reconstructed in a manner that is culturally congruent.

This sort of discussion is absent from the book. Saner (1989) questioned whether Gestalt in its original form has cross-cultural validity as a therapeutic approach. It would have been
fascinating to explore specific ways in which Gestalt is modified to be culturally relevant in a Japanese or Argentinian cultural context. Even though a nuanced discussion of the impact of culture on the practice of Gestalt psychotherapy is not present, this book presents an intriguing array of postcards from around the world describing the successes and challenges of Gestalt.

References


