

Towards a Research Tradition in Gestalt Therapy

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Towards a Research Tradition in Gestalt Therapy

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PREFACE

LESLIE GREENBERG

To psychotherapists, the word “research” is a highly emotionally charged term. Therapists of all orientation have very rapid and strong gut reactions to the term. To Gestalt therapists the term often has a very negative connotation implying, among other things, oppression, violation and distortion. To therapists of other dominant orientations, like cognitive behavior therapy, it has the opposite connotation. It has the ring of true gold, and is experienced as something that is valued and validating. Such a strong polarity!

Imagine we could replace the term “research” with the term “investigation”, defined by the Oxford dictionary as: “The action of investigating something or someone; formal or systematic examination.” This puts the processes involved in investigation of examination, and of searching again and again (re-search), in a different context. For me it evokes notions of discovery; “to seek to find and not to yield”, and the narrative of a quest. Now investigation or research can be seen as exciting, desirable and possibly even heroic. To explore, discover and become aware are valued processes in the Gestalt approach as opposed to holding beliefs dogmatically without question. Beliefs that are held as absolute truths are a trap. This is especially relevant in relation to the development of theories of therapy and about therapy itself. Openness and investigation in pursuit of understanding, rather than dogma, are crucial for development, both in therapy and about therapy.

There has been a welcome growth of interest in research in the Gestalt community in the last few years. Successful research conferences have been held in Rome in 2014, and two research meetings have been held at Cape Cod in 2013 and 2015 and more are planned. This volume is most timely in promoting this trend towards more rigorous investigation of Gestalt therapy. This is a most needed development. The survival of Gestalt therapy as a legitimate psychotherapeutic treatment modality depends upon developing a base of evidence.

Gestalt therapists however are usually unimpressed with research methods that objectify clients, and fail to address the dialogical dimension

of Gestalt therapy. Outcome research and the statistics on which they rely are viewed skeptically, often because they are unfamiliar and feared, mainly because they disempower. Dogmatic beliefs against the value of objectifying research, based often on this fear, develop in reaction to the pressures of positivist dogma. I say this so strongly, based on my own experience of having initially felt all these things myself.

This volume attempts to overcome this polarity, and the dogmatic attitudes accompanying either side of this polarity, to promote inquiry and investigation to aid in the development and recognition of Gestalt therapy as an effective and recognized approach. It provides a full array of possible ways of engaging in research. Hopefully it will encourage Gestalt therapists to pose questions such as: Does Gestalt therapy work (outcome research)? How does it work (process research)? With whom is it effective (research on individual differences)? And when does what work and how (change process research)?

Gestalt therapists need to acknowledge that the professional world in which we now live has clearly become more outcome oriented, evidence based, pragmatic and socio-economically driven than ever before. The evidence-based movement which began in medicine has spread to psychotherapy in all countries. As Brownell, in this volume notes, funders and consumers of psychotherapy alike simply demand that providers, of all sorts of treatments, offer something that works, and provide credible evidence to this effect. Public policy, best practice, and treatment guidelines based on empirical evidence increasingly impacts the licensing of providers and the provision of continuing education.

Research can help Gestalt therapists demonstrate the efficacy of their approach (usually via outcome research), and to improve their understanding of which dimensions and aspects create change in psychotherapy (process research and qualitative research). Research can also help build models to support and enhance clinical models. In 1975, when I graduated from my Gestalt training, I proposed two research projects to my institute to investigate if and how change took place in our training, but the *zeitgeist* did not support research and certainly not anything that went beyond asking people about their experience (qualitative research). To try to describe or measure anything (quantitative research) was seen as antithetical to Gestalt values.

It is important for Gestalt therapists to rigorously review their treatment cases in order to determine what the underlying mechanisms of Gestalt therapy are, how to improve their own treatment success with Gestalt therapy, and when, how, and under what circumstances Gestalt therapy works. There is a growing sentiment in the setting of guidelines

for treatment that there is not a lot of credible evidence that any one therapy is significantly superior to any other, at least for depression, and possibly for most disorders. Even the usefulness of disorder specific treatment is under review. Hopefully this will move the field toward process oriented evidence based therapy and the study of processes that lead to change.

Gestalt, which is process oriented, could fare well in studying how people change, and the use of multiple single cases designs to demonstrate both efficacy and processes of change would fit with practice based research. In addition, the adoption of a critical realist epistemology, proposed by a number of the authors in this volume, would lessen the divide between proponents of phenomenological and empiricist approaches. Critical realism supports the use of empirical research methods by recognizing that there is something real out there but that our descriptions of it are constructions - ones that can move in successive approximations closer to capturing some of the features of reality but will never be able to describe things as fully knowable. This is so whether one engages in qualitative or quantitative methods. In my view the polarity between qualitative and quantitative in the field sets up a false dichotomy, and the split between these methods, as an author of this volume points out, simply becomes a distraction. In investigating a phenomenon one needs to use all methods that help you describe, understand, explain and possibly predict whatever one is studying. A Gestalt therapist should not get stuck in polarities between qualitative and quantitative, between positivism and post-modern social constructionism or with some forms of research being inherently Gestalt friendly and others not. Different types of research are best suited for differing kinds of purposes, and all of them are appropriate to support Gestalt therapy. So, ultimately, research needs to be done in a manner that does not deny complexity, nor the spontaneity of the psychotherapist's work, but also does capture the reliable regularities that can and do occur across people and across psychotherapy sessions. I am sure this book will help promote such efforts. Kudos to the editors for pulling together this important book *Towards a Research Tradition in Gestalt Therapy*.

Toronto, April 2016

INTRODUCTION

BRIDGING PRACTICE AND RESEARCH IN GESTALT THERAPY

JAN ROUBAL, GIANNI FRANCESETTI,
PHILIP BROWNELL, JOSEPH MELNICK,
JELENA ZELESKOV-DJORIC¹

This book offers another step forward in establishing a research tradition in our approach. For quite a while there has been a growing awareness of the need for research in the Gestalt community. Gradually, the energy for research activities became mobilized and we are now in the “action” phase. This book is part of a larger active movement in Gestalt therapy, which strives to get Gestalt therapy clinically and academically well established and recognized.

As the title suggests, the book captures the actual phase of the process that we are in. We are striving for high research standards that are meaningful for practice, and this book helps clarify our current position in our quest for these. We would like to express our appreciation to the authors, who enthusiastically crafted their chapters for this book, took the risk to become visible with their research activities and used the chance to learn both from the process of writing and from the feedback of their readers. We hope that their courage will inspire other Gestalt practitioner-

¹ These five authors became editors of this book after being organizers of the Cape Cod research conference 2013 and Rome research seminar 2014, which both together included presentations that underset most of the chapters of this book. During the process of the book creation they distributed the tasks and so Jan Roubal became the executive editor; Phil Brownell became series editor; Joe Melnick, Gianni Francesetti and Jelena Zeleskov-Djoric became contributing editors.

researchers to use their naturally active and creative experimental approach within the field of psychotherapy research and that they too will not hesitate to present their research activities to the community.

Indeed, as Gestalt therapists we have a certain predisposition to become researchers. In our daily psychotherapy practice we carefully explore the phenomena of the psychotherapy process and we are constantly evaluating the effect of our work. Then we flexibly adjust our approach according to our findings. If we understand research as *systematic curiosity*, we can recognize ourselves as being very good at being curious about raising awareness and experimenting with new possibilities. What we need to develop further is the systematic part of research. In our approach there is a historical legacy favouring the spontaneity of the here and now experience over that of systematic conceptual thinking. However, we need both these polarities, because they support each other in their mutual figure and ground dynamics, which enables a bridge between practice and research in our approach.

Motivation to research

Why do we need to develop a research tradition? What could be our motivation? First of all, there are clear benefits for a practitioner to be involved in a research process. Using research we start to understand our work in a new way, we allow new insights to come into awareness. Research provides us with a clearer understanding of our work and allows us to describe it in more detail and in a more informed way. This leads to the development of both an individual working approach and an overall global Gestalt approach to theory and practice.

Another motivation is the awareness of a risk of being excluded from future developments in psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is rapidly developing through research and publications in scientific journals, where psychotherapists try to describe what they are doing and what they understand about the therapeutic process. If we miss the chance to participate in this dialogue and to belong to this community, we risk becoming more and more isolated. In many countries there is already a crisis concerning Gestalt therapy. In some, insurance companies do not recognize Gestalt therapy as an established method; in some others Gestalt therapy may even have a doubtful reputation as a clinical approach.

So, there is the real risk that Gestalt therapy will become more and more isolated. And as we know, an isolated organism cannot live and grow. Growth happens at the contact boundary. The movement to establish a research tradition in Gestalt therapy is a movement towards the contact

boundary of our community. Our intentionality is to support Gestalt therapists to enter into increasing contact with the wider social and scientific field. Today, research is a way of existing at the contact boundary within the community of psychotherapists.

There is yet another reason for our motivation: the richness of our approach. We can be proud of or even be in love with our theory and practice. And at the same time we may feel both satisfaction and some disappointment when we see that many of the actual developments in psychotherapy, in psychotherapy research and in neurosciences are confirming or developing concepts that have been cornerstones of our approach for sixty years. We have given and we have a lot to give to psychotherapy as well as to the wider world in terms of understanding human suffering, social analysis, political vision. We are and can be proud of our approach.

But to be proud does not mean to be self-sufficient. No organism is self-sufficient. In this regard we have to be able to balance our pride in knowing how good our method can be, with the humility of belonging to this actual world. If we want to be recognized by the world we have to be citizens of this world. Citizen is a word etymologically meaning “to be rooted on a land and belong to a group”. To be humble literally means to be close to “humus”, to the land. In order to be rooted we need to be humble. In order to belong we have to understand and to speak the language of the community that we want to belong to, we have to be able to describe what we are doing in the same way as the others do, we have to be able to speak the language that the psychotherapy community speaks. Gestalt therapy’s language has some elements of a dialect. Dialects are important, interesting and cherish history, understanding and tradition, but often do not survive the world’s changes. We need to be aware of this and open ourselves to communicating in the common language of psychotherapy and research in order to survive the changes today.

The rise of interest in research among Gestalt therapists

Gestalt therapists worldwide have awakened and are moving towards the creation of a research tradition for Gestalt therapy, but it was not always so. For years research was disdained as being positivist and too rigidly simplistic to be compatible with a Gestalt therapy ethos. While the larger fields of clinical psychology and psychotherapy moved relentlessly and increasingly towards an evidence-based practice, Gestalt therapy as a field did not. Occasionally a research project appeared in the literature, but this was more a random event than part of a movement.

Over the past few years there have been emerging signs of the tensions and the drift that could leave Gestalt therapy disadvantaged and sidelined. For example, in Germany Gestalt therapists were left out when the government sanctioned cognitive behavioural therapists but not Gestalt therapy and other humanistic experiential therapies. This happened due to the extensive research tradition in the cognitive behavioural therapy modality. It became a warning shot across the bow of Gestalt therapy world wide. A shift began to occur when in many European countries psychotherapists began to need a Master's Degree to practice. Many also began to pursue Ph.Ds. As a result they were required to undertake research. They began to be trained in quantitative and qualitative approaches and slowly began to publish.

When we call for the establishment of a research tradition, it must be said that we are not at the very beginning. Research in Gestalt therapy is relatively young, but it is not a newborn baby anymore. Besides scattered journal articles and book chapters there are also whole books focused either entirely or partially on research (e.g., Barber, 2006; Strümpfel, 2006; Brownell, 2008), Gestalt therapists interested in research have also started to gather at research conferences (for a recent review of research in Gestalt therapy see Brownell, 2016).

We can possibly say that research in Gestalt therapy is in its *adolescence* now. An adolescent does not know clearly who s/he is, and is searching for a clear identity. Her/his body does not have a coherent shape and does not coordinate all the different parts well. S/he sometimes has a tendency to polarize and simplify in order to confirm her/his own identity. On the other hand, s/he has a lot of energy, a lot of ideas, a lot of potential and ambition. Such adolescent processes resemble today's Gestalt therapy research movement. This book aims to support Gestalt therapy research in its adolescent period and to support the huge potential of thousands of Gestalt practitioners using our approach in many countries and in many different contexts.

This book itself is a risky "adolescent" endeavour. The chapters have different weak points and it would not be easy for them to fulfill really high academic standards. However, we decided not to allow ourselves to become discouraged by overly high demands. We believe it is worth making active steps and to risk being visible. We are on the way and the book reflects our current position. For these reasons the book is quite inclusive and gives voice to different perspectives, which can even offer competing arguments. We hope that the inner dynamics between chapters can foster dialogue and development. It is a part of our "adolescence" that we explore our "preferences" to figure out to which philosophies we are

attracted. It is a part of the developmental phase in which we find ourselves and any given gestalt practitioner-researcher might wonder, "Who am I?". The methods of research are dependent on the kind of philosophy of science a person adopts, and that relates to ontology and epistemology. It may be that as a whole field we will never come to one position. What is important is that Gestalt therapy provides a space for such a debate and also for a practical research activity.

There is a concrete example that demonstrates how the potential of "adolescent" energy can be released and what resonance it could have in the Gestalt therapy community. There exists a project that is focused on developing a *fidelity scale* for Gestalt therapy (Fogarty, 2015). Its creation presents an essential step in establishing concrete foundations for Gestalt therapy research. Treatment Fidelity rater scales indicate the extent to which a therapeutic treatment has been implemented as intended. The Treatment Fidelity concept operationalizes the theoretical basis of a treatment orientation by describing the key therapist behaviours that both represent the orientation, and distinguish that orientation from others. Without an adequate Treatment Fidelity procedure, it is impossible to know whether the results reflect the intended methodology (i.e., treatment as designed) or the implemented intervention (i.e., treatment as actually delivered) or whether other variables (such as treatment settings, patients, therapists) account for therapeutic change.

Treatment Fidelity scales operationalize the observable therapist behaviours that are specific to a therapeutic modality (Fogarty, 2015). Most Treatment Fidelity scales are based on therapy manuals. As Gestalt therapy does not have a manual, the Treatment Fidelity scale project is currently being developed via a Delphi Study, which is a deeply consultative and collaborative communication method.

International expert Gestalt therapists were asked to help with this project and over 60 responded with rich details in their comments. During the Delphi process, eight key concepts for GT and 24 therapist behaviours have been identified and the experts have reached a consensus on these (Fogarty, Bhar, Theiler, & O'Shea, 2016). Given the breadth of participation for the Delphi, the fidelity scale shows excellent face validity. The next step of the development process involves establishing reliability. This study is currently being conducted and substantiated in Australia. Once the scale is shown to be reliable and valid, it will be possible to use it in clinical trials, in research, and in training.

Larger psychotherapy research field

There is another aspect that provides us with some optimism regarding the establishment of a research tradition in our approach. Gestalt therapy is not alone in wanting to ground its practice and theory in scientific and academic ways. At the same time psychotherapy research in general has been advancing and the current developments and discoveries meet our epistemological roots in many ways.

Qualitative research, which by its exploratory nature can be seen as the research equivalent to “raising awareness” in our psychotherapy practice, is now better appreciated and is gaining legitimacy in the world of psychotherapy research. It seems significant that in the last edition of *Bergin and Garfield’s Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change* (McLeod, 2013) a chapter about qualitative research has appeared for the first time. Furthermore, some well established and respected academic journals already accept qualitative studies as fully-fledged research contributions. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are accepted as types of evidence and as choices of what to use in a research project, the advantages of mixed methods are particularly valued.

Some published studies point out differences between the quantitative and qualitative assessment of *therapeutic change* (e.g., Doran et al., 2015). Qualitative research methods are used for exploring therapeutic change (e.g., Elliott & Rodgers, 2008; Sandell, 1997) and thus complement the quantitative measurement of the effect of psychotherapy. Complex assessment of therapeutic change, which reflects the dialogical nature of psychotherapy, also pays considerable attention to the *client’s perspective*. The client’s voice is also valued in idiosyncratic methods, where items of quantitative measure are created by the clients themselves (e.g. Ashworth et al., 2005; Elliott, Mack, & Shapiro, 1999; Paterson, 1996).

The uniqueness of each client’s individual story and the specificity of each psychotherapeutic situation is best captured and explored in *case studies*. There are scientific journals which focus uniquely on case studies (e.g., *Pragmatic Case Studies in Psychotherapy*; *Clinical Case Studies*), or that dedicate a special section (*Psychotherapy*) or even a special issue to them (*Counselling and Psychotherapy Research 2011/1*; *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies 2014/2*). The common need for a systematic collection of case studies is becoming more and more explicit in the psychotherapy research field (e.g., Fishman, 1999; McLeod, 2010).

We can therefore observe a new process of both sides moving towards each other. The Gestalt approach is moving towards a more formal grounding in academic, clinical and research contexts and the larger

psychotherapy research field is becoming more open or even welcoming to research methodologies that are highly compatible with a Gestalt therapy epistemology.

The ground from which this book grew

Chapters of this book in most cases originated from presentations at the Gestalt therapy research conference in Cape Cod in 2013 and the Gestalt therapy research seminar in Rome one year later. These two events became an invaluable stimulus for the Gestalt practitioner researchers' community, and in order to familiarise readers with the broader context, a description of each follows.

Cape Cod conference. Within the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT), Philip Brownell began advocating for Gestalt-based research, and he assembled a group of prominent Gestalt therapists to create the *Handbook for Theory, Research, and Practice in Gestalt Therapy* (Brownell, 2008). The AAGT's research committee was created with a concomitant fund to help support research in various ways. The momentum emerging from these circumstances led to the creation of the first international research conference, held at the Gestalt International Study Center (GISC) in Cape Cod and co-convened by Philip Brownell and Joseph Melnick.

Philip Brownell had suggested the idea of systematically inviting "world class" researchers to the Conference, who would be present to encourage and stimulate novice Gestalt practitioner-researchers. He worked to contact and to obtain agreements with two such researchers. Joseph Melnick collaborated on the program and worked with staff at GISC to produce a stimulating and enriching professional event. Gestalt therapy researchers were encouraged to attend and to present their work. The theme "Towards a Research Tradition in Gestalt Therapy" was adopted, and people were encouraged to present in one of several categories: Research Completed or Underway, Research Methodology, or Philosophy of Science Supporting Research. What emerged from this meeting of researchers and practitioners was an international collaboration for a practice-based research using a single-case, timed series design, and that project is still ongoing. It includes an international panel of researchers from Chile, Russia, Germany, the Czech Republic, and the United States.

Leslie Greenberg and Linda Finlay were to be the Mentors-in-Residence for the first Conference, but, sadly, just days prior to the Conference, Leslie Greenberg's wife was tragically killed in an accident;

so, he could not attend. Finlay's work in phenomenological research was warmly received. Because Leslie Greenberg could not be at the first Conference, he became a mentor for the second International Research Conference, "Towards A Research Tradition in Gestalt Therapy, Part Two," which was held two years later, again at the GISC. Brownell and Melnick collaborated together again, and a second mentor, Scott Churchill, Editor of the journal *The Humanistic Psychologist*, was also present. Leslie Greenberg presented his work on emotion focused therapy and on the creation of a program of process-outcomes research. Scott Churchill presented on phenomenology and intersubjective process, largely based on his work with bonobo apes. Once again presenters came from all over the world. Progress on the international research project with a single case design and work on a Gestalt therapy fidelity scale was presented.

Rome seminar. Considering the need for research in psychotherapy, the European Association for Gestalt Therapy (EAGT) decided to set up a Research committee in order to support the development of research in the European Gestalt therapy community. The EAGT Research Committee was founded in 2008 from the initiative of Peter Schulthess, who became the first chair of the Committee (Gianni Francesetti and Jan Roubal being the next chairs). Among other activities the Committee supported the translation of the book: *Fritz Perls in Berlin 1893-1933: Expressionism, psychoanalysis, Judaism* (Bocian, 2010) and the creation of a book: *Gestalt Therapy in Clinical Practice. From Psychopathology to the Aesthetics of Contact* (Francesetti, Gecele, & Roubal, 2013).

Members of the EAGT Research Committee became aware that a need for an introduction to research methodology and practice had started to emerge in the Gestalt therapy community. The idea of organizing an educational seminar on research methods for Gestalt practitioners arose. Being aware that this first educational seminar in research was a novelty for the Gestalt therapy community, organizers discussed what the most appropriate method might be for participants and finally agreed on having ten invited lecturers who would present a mixture of theoretical practice and methodological perspectives that are significant for Gestalt therapy research. The seminar was convened by Gianni Francesetti, Jelena Zeleskov Djoric and Jan Roubal and it was held in Rome in May 2014.

The first day program consisted of more general topics. The presenters talked about the possibilities of bridging Gestalt therapy theory and practice. To demonstrate this they presented models of research usable in Gestalt therapy with a particular emphasis on the presentation of the relational Gestalt therapy perspective and comparative naturalistic study. The next two days relied more on specific methodological approaches

useful in Gestalt therapy research such as the use of CORE in Gestalt therapy research, grounded theory methods, single case studies, a qualitative method for management counseling as well as direct rating of the outcomes of psychotherapy.

Even though organizers were expecting to receive a reasonable number of applications for this seminar, the final 76 participants from 25 countries exceeded their expectations. The growing shared need to explore and understand research amongst Gestalt practitioners was confirmed, opening a new door for this particular area in the everyday practice of Gestalt therapists. The feedback from participants reassured us that a research network had been created and that the EAGT Research Committee could serve as a supportive and coordinating centre for further research projects.

The future. We hope to continue working with the essence and energy that came out of the Cape Cod and Rome research gatherings during the Third International Research Conference taking place in 2017. There will be a combination of educational workshops and presentations from world class researchers. Some of the presenters are from outside the field of Gestalt therapy and with their help we can continue to construct the bridge between Gestalt therapy and the larger psychotherapy community. The Conference will be held in Paris under a title “Exploring Practice-based Research in Gestalt Therapy”, with Vincent Beja, Jan Roubal, Gianni Francesetti and Mark Reck co-convening. Both the European Association for Gestalt Therapy (EAGT) and the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT) will take part in its organisation.

What can you find in the book

Maybe the best fitting metaphor for the characteristics of the book would be a *mosaic*. Each chapter, as a piece of the mosaic, depicts some aspect, some specific and limited way to respond to the need for research in our approach. The whole of the book gives the picture, which attempts to reflect the current state of research in Gestalt therapy with its spontaneity and enthusiasm, but also with the huge collection of practical experiences and richness of theoretically elaborated concepts. The book thus might offer a reduced scale picture of the state of research in Gestalt therapy in the larger field. And at the same time, the book itself is just one piece in the bigger picture of the movement towards the research tradition in our approach.

Within the mosaic you can first find the *theoretical ground* in texts describing how research in Gestalt therapy is rooted in the *historical, social* and *political context* (chapters by Ken Evans and Margherita

Spagnuolo Lobb) or in the development of a *philosophy of science* (chapters by Philip Brownell and Alan Meara). You can also find a *personal reflection* connected to introducing research into the Gestalt approach and illustrating the specific challenges met on the way (chapter by Joseph Melnick).

The second, practical part of the book is dedicated to introducing *research methods*, and you can follow *guidelines* and *examples* of some specific research approaches well suited to Gestalt practitioners. Both a general research strategy which enables the use of our relational psychotherapy skills (chapter by Linda Finlay with Ken Evans) and a *step by step introduction* of specific research methodologies (the chapter by Jan Roubal with Tomas Rihacek, the chapter by Al Wong and his colleagues and the chapter by Rolf Sandell) are presented. A *description of the process* of using an established research instrument with the authors' *methodological guidelines* offers reflections and suggestions for subsequent studies that can lead to subsequent research (chapter by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb and chapter by Christine Stevens with Katy Wakelin). You can also find a detailed description of the process of creating your *own original research instrument* (chapter by Ida Babakhanyan with Todd Burley and chapter by Pablo Herrera Salinas).

In the third part of the book you can find *examples of completed research projects*. The chapters can serve as an *inspiration* for you on how to conduct your own research project. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in exploring different aspects of psychotherapy and organisational consultant practice. Some researchers present projects using the Gestalt approach as an epistemological background and create their own, original methodological contribution (chapter by Laima Sapezinskiene with her colleagues, chapters by Liv Heidi Mjelve, Rob Farrands and Floriana Romano). Others introduce generally used research instruments into the Gestalt therapy context (chapter by Peter Schulthess with his colleagues and chapter by Jelena Zeleskov Djoric with her colleagues). Readers can benefit not only from familiarising themselves with successfully conducted research projects, but also from the experiences that the researchers gained when meeting obstacles, traps and impasses on the way.

The mosaic of the book is colourful due to different research designs, but also due to contributions from different parts of the world and so from different Gestalt therapy traditions: there are 29 contributors from 14 countries: Australia, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and USA. Moreover, you can find inspiration from a larger psychotherapy

research field (Rolf Sandell with his psychoanalytically based methodology, Linda Finlay contributing as a relational integrative psychotherapist, or a comparison of different psychotherapeutic treatments in the chapter by Peter Schulthess and his colleagues). The final touch to the whole picture is brought by Leslie Greenberg who has written the preface. One of the most influential psychotherapy researchers of our time reflects on the Gestalt therapy part of his psychotherapy background and offers his experiences as a support for establishing a research tradition in our approach.

Vision

As Gestalt therapists, and moreover as trainers or people involved in organizations, we have the responsibility for having a vision for the future. Our vision is that Gestalt therapists enter more and more into dialogue with the wider community of psychotherapists. That they can raise their voice and listen to others in order to teach and learn from each other. That Gestalt therapy fully participates in the movements, developments and the growth of the psychotherapy community. That we can contribute, according to our tradition and our soul and enter into dialogue on a cultural, social and political level. We have the responsibility to transmit an open horizon to our colleagues and to our trainees, a horizon rich in connections and possibilities, in dialogical bridges and mutual learning.

What kind of research can support this vision? Surely a research respectful of our epistemology, soul, interests, theory and practice. In the book by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman there is a chapter where the splits present in the actual culture are mentioned: body/mind, theory/practice, individual/social, conscious/unconscious, etc. They proposed to overcome these neurotic splits through the method they called Gestalt therapy. If we wrote our foundational book today, we should mention another split that our founders didn't mention, the split between research and practice.

The new trend emerging in psychotherapy research, the need to do research beginning as much as possible from the real clinical situation, means there is a need for researchers to be close to practice. And vice versa, there is also the need for practitioners to be involved in research. In summary, the aim is to bridge the gap between Gestalt therapy and other modalities, between theory and practice, between research and clinical work, to meet the needs of our field: the need not to be isolated but to share our understanding, to teach and learn from each other.

Dedication

This book is part of a big ongoing movement and it captures a particular period in the process of establishing a research tradition in our approach. However, it is important to stress that all this grew from a larger context. We want to acknowledge and thank all those Gestalt therapists involved in research who contributed to the groundwork which has made the rest possible. Namely we would like to honor here the substantial contributions of our two dear colleagues, who wrote their parts for this book, but unfortunately both deceased before they could celebrate with us its publication: Ken Evans and Todd Burley. We will miss them greatly in many ways, not least in the Gestalt practitioner-researchers' community. We want to dedicate this book to both of them.

Ken Evans was a visionary. As such, he recognized the need for research very early and he actively promoted qualitative research as an appropriate methodology for Gestalt therapists through international seminars and in the *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy* (which he founded and led). He realized the need to introduce the concept of research early on to Gestalt therapy trainees and started to integrate it into psychotherapy training programmes. Ken, together with Linda Finlay, edited a book *Relational-centred Research for Psychotherapists: Exploring Meanings and Experience* (Finlay, & Evans, 2009). To illustrate Ken's contribution to the Gestalt therapy research movement and also his way of bridging practice and research we would like to quote Linda Finlay:

Ken's teaching and inspirational practice of relational psychotherapy helped me to more clearly articulate the relational approach I had been striving for in my research practice. In turn, my phenomenological research and writing experience gave voice to Ken's intuitive though less formed research approach. As we witnessed each other's work in both academic and therapy contexts, we saw the magic in the other's practice. We appreciated the open, non-defensiveness of the other and the preparedness to set aside ego and shame processes, as we evolved our ideas. Our commitment to, and passion for, relational working (be it in therapy, training or research fields) grew.

My view of Ken is that he was an extraordinary and inspiring psychotherapist with a special ability to be truly present in the here-and-now. He also could engage positively with multi-layered relational exploration. He had the courage to probe ambivalence and uncomfortable aspects – in himself and his clients – and he invited challenge from the Other in order to deepen understanding and to open to I-Thou contact. I think what stands out for me as his big contribution was his preparedness

to be creative and go beyond traditional research boundaries in the service of relational explorations of lived experience.

Todd Burley was one of the rare and at the same time so much needed examples of connecting the community of Gestalt practitioners with the academic world. Through his teaching and writing Todd inspired people in both these fields. He trained Gestalt therapists in the USA as well as internationally. At the Department of Psychology at Loma Linda University he taught courses in Gestalt therapy, neuropsychological assessment, treatment and research in schizophrenia, cognitive psychology and cortical functions. Todd really believed in doing research that was meaningful and he encouraged his students to think outside the box. Todd Burley's contribution is summarized by Bob Resnick:

Todd eschewed that today's diagnostic systems and concomitant research-driven outcome measures were overly focused on counting symptoms as opposed to conceptualizing the experience of the client. He was always interested in finding out how to understand something in process terms and had a longstanding interest in the inclusion of new research regarding the functioning of the brain in connection to psychotherapy. He was interested in the establishment of a generic psychotherapy that was not bound to a specific school or framework and he saw Gestalt therapy as the best integrative and integrating model for this task.

Todd, among other things, was wickedly irreverent – about research, about religion, about people, about Gestalt therapy, about universities and more. His keen mind and sharp wit frequently had him thinking ‘out of the box.’ He was creative as well as methodical in his approach to the world although he was never known for either his memory or his follow through on topics of interest to others. He was a tireless seeker and traveler and was always interested in the differences in people, cultures and rituals. Todd valued the unusual, idiosyncratic and even exotic but always had the larger lens of integration.

Ida Babakhyan adds her personal experience:

When I presented to Todd why the established measure we used for my thesis didn't really capture the depressed state I saw clinically, he encouraged me to create a measure that would capture what I saw clinically if I cared about that work. That is consistent with how Todd approached research - if something doesn't work you don't give up on it, you find what works holding true to theory but also rigors science to validate the work.

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PART I:
THEORETICAL GROUND

CHAPTER ONE

WARRANT, RESEARCH, AND THE PRACTICE OF GESTALT THERAPY

PHILIP BROWNELL

Introduction

The field of Gestalt therapy has experienced a sea change with regard to the issue of the relevance of research for Gestalt therapy. In a recent article and related commentaries (Brownell, 2014a, 2014b; Burley, 2014; O’Shea, 2014; McConville, 2014) several Gestalt writers agreed the field of Gestalt therapy needed to “get serious” about research, and Ken Evans (2013) called for more research on the subject in his chapter in the landmark volume edited by Francesetti, Gecele, and Roubal (2013). In taking research more seriously, then, Gestalt therapists need to identify with a philosophy of science that works best for them, embrace an array of research methodologies, and attend to the publication of their research in both Gestalt-oriented, peer-reviewed journals, and those in the wider field of psychotherapy outcomes studies.

The professional world in which we live has clearly become pragmatic and utilitarian with regard to psychotherapy. It has become based on evidence. The evidence-based movement in psychology began in medical practice, and it has spread to virtually every sector of the public square. People simply demand that providers of all sorts do something that works and that can be shown to work. Thus, there must be evidence, and that evidence must be credible. At one point this might have been cast as an intrusion of managed care, but it has long since become a matter of public policy, best practice, and resulting treatment guidelines that also impact the licensing of providers and the provision of continuing education. Thus, the conversation that Gestalt therapists need to have with one another about issues related to research is not an idle and academic consideration. We need to get serious about research, but we cannot do that if we are

laboring under outdated views of science and how research is actually carried out.

I realize that gut reactions are common when someone makes an assertion, but we as Gestalt therapists really do need to get serious about evidence-based practice and the research that supports it, and when I say that, I mean we need to come up to speed, to be more informed, nuanced, and current with regards to our philosophy of science and our understanding of the processes of research, including how these relate to evidence-based practice. Research is not the bogey man. We are not stuck somewhere in a polarity between positivism and social construction with some forms of research being inherently Gestalt friendly and others not. The fact is that there are various kinds of research that each are best suited for differing kinds of purposes, and all of them are appropriate to the support of Gestalt therapy.

People need science to keep the philosophers' feet on the ground, and people need philosophy to help number crunchers get to the significance of their equations. In one version of the scientific method, for instance, it is a three-legged stool (Machado, 2007). One leg consists of systematic observation. A second leg is composed of mathematical analysis, and the third leg resides in the critical thinking of what the numbers may mean, i.e. science and philosophy. In terms of philosophy, although there may be many kinds of philosophy relevant to psychology, such as ethics, I will focus on three elements of a contemporary philosophy of science: naturalism, critical realism, and post-positivism. In terms of science, an adequate philosophy helps people consider the multitude of methods that comprise acceptable evidence for an evidence-based practice. These things will be examined subsequently.

A current philosophy of science

An adequate philosophy of science, one that provides appropriate and sufficient support for the pursuit of research within a Gestalt-therapy ethos, must address the issue of naturalism, the shift from positivism to post-positivism, and the need for a critically realist worldview.

Natural vs. anti-natural attitudes

Naturalism is the philosophy of the naturalist perspective, and it stands behind the human science of psychology. K. A. Aho (2012), in the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, asserted that a human being is a "lived-body," – a dialogical way of being that is already engaged and embedded in a web of socio-historical meanings. That is, people are born

embodied into a culture, thrown into it as the philosopher Martin Heidegger has said. Aho claimed that the job of the human sciences is not to explain existence but to understand how we interpret ourselves, how we make meaning out of our experience of being in this world. A background of meanings is always already in place informing the development and direction of a worldview. The background that informs the discipline of psychology is naturalism, but by contrast the background that informs the discipline of theology is anti-naturalism, and perhaps for some a more specific version of non- or anti-naturalism known as supernaturalism. (Brownell, 2013¹)

One can be a naturalist or one can be an anti-naturalist, and many people espousing a worldview consistent with phenomenology are of the latter variety. That is because naturalism functions within a natural attitude, and philosophical phenomenologists attempt to escape it by adopting a phenomenological attitude and conducting phenomenological reductions² (Sokolowski, 2000; Moran, 2000). One of the reasons this philosophical method is unsatisfactory for psychotherapists and has to be adapted (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Giorgi, 2009; Bloom, 2009) is that it thematizes the observed client, who becomes a construction of the therapist's constituting ego. This thematizing, further, is not a simple theorizing or interpreting; it is the reduction of something complex to something manageable within the symbolic nature of language, "... reducing the texture of lived experience to the stilled life of conceptual thought" (Smith, 2002, p.69)³.

Emmanuel Levinas considered such thematizing to be a violence toward the transcendent Other (Critchley, 2002; Levinas, 1999). Because he proposed such a transcendent Other, and because such an Other is necessary to Gestalt's theory of dialogue (see below), the consequences

¹ This section borrows highly from my chapter in Thomas Plante's three-volume work on abnormal psychology through the ages.

² "The turn to the phenomenological attitude is called the *phenomenological reduction*, a term that signifies the 'leading away' from the natural targets of our concern, 'back' to what seems to be a more restricted viewpoint...this suspension, this neutralization of our doxic modalities, is also called the *epochē* ...The *epochē* in phenomenology is simply the neutralizing of natural intentions that must occur when we contemplate those intentions." (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 49)

³ "Thematizing" is a complex construct; in addition to what is said above, thematizing refers to such things as how evoked imagery in our experience is given form *as* mental imagery, involving quasi-pictorial representations (Martin, 2004) and how the pre-verbal "feel" of a given space ignites context sensitivity in a given, situated subject (Lewandowski, 2000).