Editorial

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Psychotherapy: The Challenge and Power of Consistency

This issue of Gestalt *Theory* presents coherently compiled some essential basic concepts of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy for the first time in English and thus beyond the German-speaking circle[1]. A side effect of such a systematic presentation might be that it also helps to avoid the frequent confusion with Gestalt therapy, which has a similar sounding name, but most of its forms differ substantially in its basic concepts. A brief history of Gestalt theoretical psychotherapy is given at the end of this introductory article.

In view of the elementary role of cognitive processes for human experience and behavior, the first paper in this issue highlights the epistemological orientation of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy, which underlies all sub-concepts of the method from personality theory to praxeology: "Critical Realism: The Epistemic Position of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy," by Katharina Sternek.

The second contribution of Bernadette Lindorfer' deals with a core component of personality theory in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy: "Personality Theory in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy: Kurt Lewin's Field Theory and his Theory of Systems in Tension Revisited". This contribution is complemented by a critical synopsis of the views on ego and self in Gestalt theory and their heuristic potential for psychotherapy: "Ego and Self in Gestalt theory" (G. Stemberger).

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[1] Up to now, there have only been scattered publications on individual aspects from the field of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy in English: H.-J. P. Walter's contributions on the compatibility of Gestalt theory and cognitive behavioral therapy (1997) and of Gestalt theory and Gestalt therapy (1999; cf. on this topic also Wollants 2008/2012 and Ragsdale 2010); M. Ruh (1999) and G. Stemberger (2008) on the issue of diagnostics in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy; K. Sternek (2007) on the relationship of Gestalt psychology and attachment theory; U. Wedam (2007) and S. Wieltschnig (2016) on trauma therapy.

Angelika Böhm turns to the understanding of the therapeutic relationship and praxeology in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy: "Basic Principles for Therapeutic Relationship and Practice in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy".

Taking the example of specific Gestalt theoretical approaches to understanding anorexia using the multiple-field approach, Thomas Fuchs explains some aspects of Gestalt theoretical psychotherapeutic practice: "Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy—A Clinical Example".

Next, psychoanalyst and Gestalt psychologist Giancarlo Trombini (in collaboration with Elena Trombini and Gerhard Stemberger) presents possibilities of a Gestalt theoretical analysis of the progression of psychotherapies, offering criteria for the decision on the completion of therapies: "Past-present-future as a frame of reference. Reconciliation of time perspectives as a criterion for therapy completion".

Edward Ragsdale concludes the thematic focus of this issue with an exposition and discussion of one of the most fundamental principles of any Gestalt-theory based psychotherapy: "Relational Determination in Interpersonal and Intrapsychic Experience".

Such a coherent presentation of basic theoretical concepts has an implication that will be made explicit in the following introduction to this thematic focus which is that consistency in thought and behavior plays a key role in human life—and therefore also a theoretical conception of psychotherapy needs consistency.

1. Psychotherapy Rooted in the Overall System of Gestalt Theory

Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy sees itself as a method of psychotherapy that bases its theoretical assumptions not only on *partial* theses and *partial* findings *of* Gestalt psychology, as we find in various other schools of psychotherapy, but tries to apply in a consistent way the *overall system* of Gestalt theory of the Berlin School (Wertheimer, Köhler, Koffka, Lewin, and others).

This is possible if all presupposes that Gestalt psychology (or more precisely: the Gestalt theory of the Berlin School) *is* actually an organized system whose various sub-approaches are systematically related to each other.

According to Wolfgang Metzger and Paul Tholey, one can name five such sub-systems of Gestalt theory: Gestalt psychology as *methodology* (holistic view and experimental orientation), Gestalt psychology as *phenomenology* (a wealth of research-backed knowledge about Gestalt phenomena in perception and cognition, behavior and life processes, including social relations), Gestalt psychology as a *theory of dynamic processes* (from productive thought to the psychology of will and social life), Gestalt psychology as a *psychophysical approach* (including

the working hypothesis of isomorphism), and permeating the above mentioned four sub-approaches— Gestalt psychology as an *epistemological approach* (critical realism).

These five subsystems of Gestalt theory are mutually dependent and support each other. Note that whoever takes only partial aspects from this overall system accepts substantial losses. For example, Gestalt theory shares a holistic orientation with numerous other systems; detached from the experimental orientation of Gestalt psychology, however, the holistic attitude deprive the possibility to determine the reach and limits of what the whole in the concrete case *is* and what holds it together as a whole. A speculative "everything is somehow connected with everything" then easily takes the place of a clarification of the concrete connections in the specific case.

2. On Consistency in Psychotherapy Concepts

Nevertheless, it would have little relevance to strive for consistency in the formulation of the theoretical foundations of one's psychotherapy method if consistency did not also have corresponding significance in the actual life of human beings. This conviction is among the most fundamental in Gestalt theory. According to this view, the striving for consistency is part of and an expression of the basic dynamic ordering principle that has been identified in Gestalt theory as the striving for Prägnanz, the umbrella term for the so-called Gestalt laws. Metzger formulates on this principle pointedly: "The urge to fix what is in disorder and to be an obstetrician to what is undeveloped is undoubtedly one of man's deepest drives......." (Metzger, 1943/2001, 232; transl. GSt)

Echoing these and kindred thoughts, many schools of psychotherapy emphasize the role of consistency in the life of humans. For example one thinks of the pursuit of meaning in Adler's (individual psychology) and Frankl's (logotherapy and existential analysis) therapy systems. Or the idea of the necessary integration of the personality in the course of individuation in C.G. Jung's therapy system, where personality integration and maturation is reached by overcoming inconsistencies between the individual and collective unconscious. One thinks, to add a further example, of C. Rogers' call for overcoming the incongruity hampering the unfolding of the personality, the necessity to close the gap between the "real self," and the "ideal self," between the "I am" and the "I should"; and one thinks of his "Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change," with the dual emphasis on the importance of congruence, both on the side of the client and on the side of the therapist. Common to all these approaches, albeit in different forms, is the conviction that consistency is essential to human life and supporting the pursuit of it is one of the core tasks of psychotherapy.

However, a key question in this context is: What does the respective consistency claim refer to? *What is* something supposed to be consistent with?

Probably the most elementary claim for the consistency for human life is matching of our individual phenomenal world of perception and experience with the extra-phenomenal reality which we share with other human beings. Human life and coexistence in society and shared natural environment would not be possible if veridicality of our perceptual world could not be given to a very high degree. Even more, the dynamic peculiarities of our phenomenal world described by Gestalt theory make this phenomenal microcosm even "super-veridical"—it is not only able to represent the realities of the extra-phenomenal world to a large extent accurately, it can furthermore grasp their meaning, function, and valence for the respective human being; this is more essential for the life of the human being and thus more veridical than the completely exact representation of the other physical features of the extra-phenomenal world.

3. Inconsistency in Life

Even in the simplest experience encountered every day, one repeatedly encounters inconsistencies, facts that do not fit together for oneself in the given situation. One may feel compelled to review one's perception and one's previous models of understanding and explaining the given facts and relationships. Especially if this concerns one's most important interpersonal relationships, the task of gaining a new consistency of one's world and oneself within this world may put oneself to a hard test. Already the earliest Gestalt theoretical works on psychopathology, which was still initiated by Max Wertheimer himself, illuminated these connections between the demand for consistency and mental health in their essential outlines (see Schulte, 1924; Levy, 1943; Levy, 1986). Failure to meet the requirement of consistently in reordering one's life and one's view of it, especially after crises, can lead to great psychological distress (and thus to psychotherapy). During or in the wake of such a crisis "detailed processes must take place again and again if the recentering is to result in a livable, concrete, and consistent view of life and world, compatible with the objective data and structures of the world, as well as with the psychological needs of the person "(Levy, 1943, 66f).

However, we know that people often differ quite widely in whether they perceive something as inconsistent at all. And also the reaction of humans to the finding of inconsistencies in their world can turn out quite differently. Leon Festinger, for example, has put forward the thesis (still popular today) that humans, when confronted with inconsistencies in their world, tend to eliminate the resulting

"cognitive dissonance" by restructuring and reinterpretation (Festinger, 1957). In my opinion, Solomon Asch was right when he rejected this thesis (Asch, 1958). The existence of modes of reaction as described by Festinger and that these modes can also lead the striving for consistency astray, are all undisputed. However, if this were the dominating basic tendency of man, there would have been no further development of mankind at all, then only the perception of inconsistencies and the confrontation with them enables further development either be it in science or be it in the individual life of man. Man's striving for consistency is both a challenge and a powerful driving force, in coping with everyday life as well as in psychotherapy.

If one looks at the theory systems of the various psychotherapeutic schools, it is not uncommon that from time to time in their development they contain concepts and approaches that prove to be incompatible in the further course. Giuseppe Galli points to a historical example of this in the development of psychoanalysis: "While Freud based the therapeutic treatment on the relational and dialogical method, the theory was created with building blocks that were characterized by a monopersonal way of thinking. However, this contradiction between theory and practice in Freud has overcome by some of his followers through the application of a relational model" (Galli, 1997 in 2017, 109).

During the development of Gestalt theory itself, such inconsistencies have repeatedly come to light. Wolfgang Köhler, for example, has pointed out that even core theses of Gestalt theory, such as the understanding of the striving for Prägnanz, had to be corrected over time compared to their beginnings, because their original understanding could not explain certain phenomena without contradictions (Köhler, 1951/1993). Giuseppe Galli, on the other hand, has pointed out other inconsistencies in the course of the development of Gestalt theory—where its relational approach was not consistently implemented, for example in the sometimes one-sided attention to the object side of the field of experience, or where, for example, Lewin's model of life space, by neglecting the psychophysical connections, did not fit together with his discoveries on interpersonal processes and group dynamics (see on this Galli, 1997 and Lindorfer in the present issue of this journal).

4. "Naive Psychology" and Therapeutic Concepts

The contributions of this issue show the effort to achieve the greatest possible consistency of the presented basic concepts of Gestalt theoretical psychotherapy, on one hand, with regard to their internal conceptual consistency, and on the other hand, with regard to the correspondence with today's realities of life of psychotherapists and clients in our time and our world.

Especially the work of the Gestalt psychologist Fritz Heider (Heider, 1958[2]) reminds us, however, of another, ultimately even decisive dimension of the requirement of consistency. Insofar as the explanatory and orientational models of psychotherapy theory find their way at all into the everyday consciousness of the therapists and their clients (or rather: find their way *back*, for that is where all these concepts once had their origin), they encounter there what Heider calls "naive psychology," "the unformulated or half-formulated knowledge of interpersonal relations as it is expressed in our everyday language and experience" (Heider, 1958, 4). As Heider rightly points out, it is this "common-sense psychology" that—more or less influenced by scientific ideas—"guides our behavior toward other people" (and generally in life, one could add). Transferred to psychotherapy, one can and must say: This applies to both sides in the therapeutic relationship, by no means only to the client's side. In their "naive psychology," therapists are more alike their clients than they sometimes believe.

This is, of course, another challenge to the pursuit of consistency in psychotherapy. On the therapist's side, the theory system of the psychotherapy method she has learned meets a "naive psychology" already fully formed and quite largely tried and tested in life. "Scientific theory" and "naive psychology" temporarily enter into a coexistence, and in the successful case perhaps a mutual penetration and enrichment in the course of processing inconsistencies between these two. The touchstone for this process will ultimately be the interrelation and the fitting together of the resulting "critical-phenomenal world" of knowledge and half-knowledge, of beliefs and concepts, with the "naive-phenomenal world" of immediate experience.

The "naive psychology" of everyday life is so strongly anchored in immediate experience that it outstrips many an intellectually acquired theoretical concept that is incompatible with it in terms of experiential and behavioral effectiveness. One of the strengths of the Gestalt-theoretical approach is precisely that it gives priority to phenomenology even in the process of cognition, and thus has low risk of contradicting people's world of experience in its conceptualizations: "There seems to be a single starting point for psychology, exactly as for all the other sciences: the world as we find it, naively and uncritically," Wolfgang Köhler says (1947, 3). Even if this is often hard to recognize, the most complex and abstract concepts of the various schools of thought also took their starting point mostly

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[2] Developed in close cooperation with Beatrice A. Wright. Fritz Heider turns to the analysis of "basic components of our naive ideas about other people and social situations"; the concepts investigated were "Life space; Perceiving; Causing; Can; Trying; Wanting; Suffering; Sentiments; Belonging; Ought" (1958, 18). The oversimplification of Heider's work in contemporary attribution theories has been countered in recent years primarily by Bertram Malle and his colleagues (Brown University), who also advance Heider's approach in promising ways (Malle, 2008, 2011).

in phenomenology. Henle, to give an example, makes it plausible that Freud's concept of the superego was originally "more a phenomenal report than a psychological theory" (Henle, 1962, 398).

Gestalt theory and Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy try to keep this close connection between naive phenomenology and theoretical-conceptual processing alive and also in awareness. This is also an essential basis for mutual understanding in the therapeutic encounter between client and therapist.

From this understanding it also follows for Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy that the therapist's self-experience in her training can not only be exhausted in working through her own personal history and strivings, but must also encompass her own world of ideas and the way she generates these ideas. Therapists often say of themselves, "I'm more the practitioner, not so much the theorist." But this is a big misunderstanding. In fact, there are only practitioners, nothing else: Those practitioners who know something about their implicit theories and thus have an ear for the implicit theories of their clients, and those practitioners who are blind to their own implicit theories and therefore enslaved by them. The latter then also have a hard time being a help to their clients in dealing with the inconsistencies of their world of ideas.

Hilarion G. Petzold expresses a similar, but even more far-reaching thought, when he speaks of the necessity of co-respondence processes in one's own person, the confrontation with the existing 'believe systems' and, on the other hand, of the co-responding, collegial confrontation in the field of research, theory, and practice tradition in which one stands" (Petzold, 1992, 464).

5. Alternatives to Embedding Psychotherapy in an Overall Theoretical System

To attempt to base the formulation of one's own psychotherapy theory on an overall theoretical system, such as Gestalt theory, is by no means without alternatives. There are also counter-arguments. For example, one has pointed out the danger that such an overall system can also tempt one not to take note of facts or possibly even to bend them if they do not fit the chosen system. The above mentioned Festinger's dissonance theory and related approaches, for example, emphasize this direction unilaterally, without the analysis of the concrete conditions that promote or hinder such an erroneous development.

As an alternative to the overall systems, two approaches are mainly advocated today, which partly overlap: on one hand, eclecticism, the compilation of "evidence-based" techniques and practices without reference to an overarching theory while on the other hand, "overcoming the outdated schools" by integrating different approaches into a "general psychotherapy." We are critical of both

approaches—eclecticism for fundamental reasons, but also the rash attempts at integration where the conditions for such a general psychotherapy are still lacking.

Mary Henle describes the problem of eclecticism thus: When there are divergent theoretical approaches to a particular topic, it is often the case that neither has a fully satisfactory explanation to offer (otherwise there would be no controversy). "Controversies do not exist in science with regard to processes which are fully understood. Thus the task seems to be one of arriving at more new comprehensive theories of the processes in question" (Henle, 1957 in 1986, 91). In her view the "parallel between productive solutions of theoretical problems and of personal problems becomes striking," and refers to C.G. Jung's conviction: "Conflicts are never resolved on their own level. They are outgrown. Only on a higher level can you see both sides" (ibid, 92).

These are also valid arguments in our eyes against a hasty "unification of the schools" in a "general psychotherapy." As desirable as this goal of a new overall system may seem, its achievement cannot be arbitrarily accelerated. Edwin Rausch, one of the most important German Gestalt psychologists of the second generation, once stated on this subject— referring to the science of psychology:

> "While for a later time a development of psychology can be imagined in which the various directions and currents unite, such an integration should not be attempted hastily. In particular, it is to be rejected that one or the other side claims to be able to absorb the Gestalt theory, while in reality its foundations are abandoned or have not been taken note of at all. So it is better to march separately for the time being." (Rausch, 1979 in 1992, 144; transl. GSt)

Similarly, Henle has spoken out against a "premature reconciliation of Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis" (Henle, 1986, 85). Such an endeavor needs "a systematic analysis of the assumptions of both psychologies that is concerned with implicit as well as explicit assumptions," to "reveal both important differences and surprising compatibilities of the theories" (86). Though, progress has been made on this path in many schools of therapy from several decades ago, it has not yet come to an end. A prerequisite for further progress on this way is the disclosure and reasoning of one's own concepts in their systematic context, not to assert their superiority over all others, but to open them up to scrutiny for similarities and differences. This is also the aim of the presentation of some basic concepts of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy in this issue.

Petzold's plea for a "plural therapeutic culture" still remains relevant in this state of affairs (Petzold, 1992, 460), and will probably remain so in the long run, because—as Kriz puts it—"The diversity of basic concepts thus ultimately reflects the diversity of human life and will therefore always be encountered by us in professional psychotherapy as well..." (Kriz, 2007, XXII; transl. GSt).

Annex: A Brief Sketch of the History of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy

The history of the clinical-psychotherapeutic application of Gestalt theory cannot be adequately presented within the narrow confines of this editorial. I must limit myself to some necessarily highly abbreviated remarks.[3]

In the now more than 100-year history of Gestalt theory, its approach has radiated from the early beginnings to a multitude of people working in clinical psychotherapy and the "schools of therapy" developed or represented by them. It did so in interaction with similarly directed scientific developments and new orientations of its time, which above all had in common the aim of overcoming of mechanistic conceptions of life and man and the search for more appropriate holistic-dynamic alternatives (cf. Ash, 1995; Harrington, 1996, King & Wertheimer, 2005). For example, people trained and inspired by Gestalt theory significantly influenced the development of group psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, hypnotherapy, and catathym imaginative psychotherapy, various methods associated with humanistic psychology from Rogers' client-centered approach to Gestalt therapy and Moreno's psychodrama, to name a few. In this broader sense, psychotherapy based on or inspired by Gestalt theory has been around for more than 100 years. However, this early history of Gestalt theory in psychotherapy consisted, on the one hand, of the insertion of certain ideas and concepts, procedures, and research findings from Gestalt theory into other ideas, whereby these adoptions were often not insignificantly distant from their origin; on the other hand, in the personal integration of Gestalt theoretical thought into therapeutic practice by individual clinically active Gestalt psychologists who never set themselves the task of systematically formulating the basic concepts of their Gestalt-theoretical-psychotherapeutic work. (e.g., Levy, Luchins, Harrower).

The impetus for such a formulation and thus for a Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy in the narrower sense was given a little more than 40 years ago by a small group of psychotherapists in Germany around the period of Hans-Jürgen P. Walter and Rainer Kästl within the framework of the GTA (Gestalt Theory and its Applications), which they co-founded in 1979. Walter had previously presented a first outline of a Gestalt theoretical rationale for the integrative application of Gestalt therapy, psychodrama, talk therapy, depth psychology, behavior therapy, and group dynamics in 1977. Since then, the focus of further development and application of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy has increasingly shifted to Austria, motherland of so many psychotherapy methods in history. It is now being further developed there by the Austran Association for Gestalt Theoretical

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[3] For a more detailed account, we refer to the chapter "Applications of Gestalt Theory in the Field of Psychotherapy," in Kästl & Stemberger 2011, 27–47, and for an account of the development of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy within the GTA to Stemberger 2019.

Psychotherapy (ÖAGP) with the GTA as its scientific umbrella organization, integrating the impulses of other Gestalt-psychologically oriented clinicians from other countries—among them especially from Italy (e.g., Giuseppe Galli, Anna Arfelli Galli, Giancarlo Trombini, Andrzej Zuczkowski).

Summary

As an introduction to this issue, the article substantiates the possibility and meaningfulness of a coherent theoretical system for psychotherapy, as it is strived for in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy and presented in several articles in this issue. The necessity of consistency in the theoretical assumptions and concepts of a psychotherapy method is not derived from scientific considerations alone, but already arises from the elementary role of consistency in human life. This also results in the requirements for the consistency of theoretical foundations of psychotherapy. It is not fulfilled in a mere internal, logical consistency of its models, but only in the actual fitting together with the critical-phenomenal and naive-phenomenal worlds of the therapists and their clients (in interaction with their "naive psychologies") in the reality test of life.

Keywords: Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy, psychotherapy schools, consistency in life and psychotherapy, therapy integration, naive psychology.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag begründet einführend zu diesem Heft die Möglichkeit und Sinnhaftigkeit eines in sich zusammenhängendes theoretischen Systems für die Psychotherapie, wie es in der Gestalttheoretischen Psychotherapie angestrebt und im vorliegenden Heft in einigen Beiträgen vorgestellt wird. Die Notwendigkeit von Konsistenz der theoretischen Annahmen und Konzepten einer Psychotherapie-Methode leitet sich nicht erst aus wissenschaftlichen Überlegungen ab, sondern ergibt sich bereits aus der elementaren Rolle von Konsistenz im Leben des Menschen. Daraus ergeben sich auch Anforderungen an die Konsistenz theoretischer Grundlagen der Psychotherapie. Sie erfüllt sich nicht in einer inneren, logischen Konsistenz ihrer Modelle, sondern erst im tatsächlichen Zusammenpassen mit den kritisch-phänomenalen und naiv-phänomenalen Welten der Therapeuten und ihrer Klienten (im Zusammenspiel mit ihrer „Naiven Psychologie") in der Wirklichkeitsprüfung des Lebens.

Schlüsselwörter: Gestalttheoretische Psychotherapie; psychotherapeutische Schulen; Konsistenzforderung in Leben und Psychotherapie; Therapie-Integration; Naive Psychologie.

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