

A Gestalt Perspective on Working with Group Process

By John Bernard Harris

In this article I describe a number of themes that derive from important aspects of Gestalt therapy theory, and which, taken together, provide a framework for studying and working with the dynamics of small groups such as therapy groups. I will list the themes, and then discuss each one in turn. The two main aspects of Gestalt theory that I am using the themes to illustrate are field theory, and phenomenological method. My comments are relatively brief, and if you are interested in this way of looking at groups, then you may want to read further. A list offering suggested reading is attached.

1. The group is an *organism-environment* field consisting of multiple forces in functional interrelationship to each other and to the whole.
2. Experience has an underlying structure.
3. The group field is multi-boundaried.
4. The group field is multi-layered.
5. The group has a number of contexts (field conditions), all of which affect its here-and-now process.
6. We can discover the nature and structure of the group field both by observation and by systematic experimentation.
7. Everyone has a point of view, and no point of view is inherently preferable to any other.
8. The observer is always and necessarily part of the situation, and affects the object of study, and vice versa.
9. We should try to distinguish naive experience from theories, hypotheses, assumptions, preconceptions etc.
10. Begin by describing phenomena, rather than trying to explain them.
11. All data are potentially relevant

Discussion

1. The group is an ?organism-environment field? consisting of multiple forces in functional interrelationship to each other and to the whole.

The concept of an interactive force field came originally from physics. You will have heard of (and experienced the effects of!) magnetic and gravitational fields. These are regions of space and time in which electro-magnetic and gravitational forces respectively operate on things or events that occur in them. In such a field, bodies are affected depending on where they are in the field, and on the strength and the direction of the forces in that part of the field that are affecting them. For example, if a compass is placed in a magnetic field, the needle aligns itself with the invisible lines of magnetic flux. Or if you are close to a large planet, the force of gravity will pull you towards the

planet, and the strength of the gravitational pull is proportional to the mass of the planet.

The social scientist Kurt Lewin was the first to adapt the *force field* idea for use in the social sciences. He likened a social setting such as a group to a field in which various social and psychological forces were at play, pulling and pushing us in different directions. His approach was a dynamic one, an attempt to capture and express the vigour and energy in complex human and social situations.

What, more precisely, is a field? The Gestalt therapist Gary Yontef defines a field as: "A totality of mutually influencing forces that together form a unified interactive whole." This definition draws our attention to the myriad of forces at play in any social-psychological situation, and also to the fact that these are dynamic, organized and interconnected.

Gestalt therapy has a particular version of field theory. Its starting point is the *organism-environment field*, a field that is created and sustained from the interactions of humans (and other animals) and their environment. In this field many different kinds of factors operate at the same time. I am a physical body, also biologically an animal, as well as a therapist, a Briton, etc. All these are part of the field, and all must be taken into account in any investigation of the field. Let me illustrate this more concretely.

Imagine that I am a therapist who is starting a new group. The members arrive and settle themselves in the group room. I look around at them, noticing my own feelings and wondering what theirs are. As I sit in the group room waiting for the group to start, my present physical environment includes air to breathe, a chair to support my body, and a room temperature of about sixty degrees. Looking out of the window, I can see trees being blown by a blustery wind.

The description of this as a social scene might be quite different. This is the meeting of a long-term therapy group, with six members, who include a teacher, a social worker and a trainee counsellor. The group meets at a therapy Centre in a lower-middle-class part of Manchester. The group consists of four women and two men.

Without labouring the point, it is clear that lots of different aspects of this event co-exist and are part of the total picture. In Gestalt we call the whole complex and many-faceted system of 'me-now-in-relation-to-my-environment' my 'organism-environment field'. The sudden outburst of hyphens is significant, and meant to indicate that the organism (or person) is intimately connected with their environment, and cannot really be separated from it. When I breathe it is air around me that I breathe. When I am sad, it is an absent friend about whom I am sad. My doing therapy depends on others wanting it to be done enough to pay me for the service. My writing this handout is based on my expectation that someone will read and enjoy it. In short: no aspect of my behaviour and experience can exist except in relation to the organism/environment field of which I am a part.

Fritz Perls put it beautifully:

No individual is self-sufficient; the individual can exist only in an environmental field. The individual is inevitably, at every moment, a part of some field. His behaviour is a function of the total field, which includes both him and his environment.

As a human organism, then, I am always intimately connected with my environment, totally dependent on it, and in constant interaction with it. The words I am using are not adequate to express this relationship, because they might be taken to imply that my environment and I are in theory separable, albeit 'connected' in practice. But this is not the case. My existence as a human person is not only impossible but literally unthinkable except in relation to my environment. I am not merely 'in' the organism-environment field, but wholly 'of' it.

As a consequence, Gestalt has a *relational theory of self*. What I call my self is also part of the field, and created from moment to moment in the field. And how I create myself (for instance through the choices I make, or the preferences I express) cannot be separated from my simultaneous creation of other: self and other are *polar opposites*. So as I write, I become 'a writer', and I imagine people reading and responding to what I write, and therefore to me. This radical view entails seeing individual group members not as separate people who happen to interact in the group setting (this would be a systems approach) but as parts of the same field who actually co-create and co-sustain each other in the ongoing group process.

It is easy to see why field theory might form a sound basis for our understanding of group processes. Its emphasis is precisely on process, relationship, activity, and the dynamic forces of the field that we experience in groups. It is a holistic approach, attempting to look at *the total situation*, to use Lewin's words. It also focuses on the here-and-now, the current state of the organism-environment field, rather than on the past or future. These seem to be precisely the kind of explanatory ideas that might help us to capture the complex and ever-changing social interactions that characterise group life.

If we begin to apply field theory to group dynamics, then we first consider the group and its environment as *the group field*. Following Yontef's definition, we can state that there is nothing that occurs in the group that is not part of this field. This includes the behaviour, interactions, feelings and fantasies of individual group members - all that we include as elements of the group process. All group phenomena are 'of?' the field, in the strong sense of being actually constituted by the field and its complex structures and dynamics. The people and events of the group are continually mutually influencing and affecting each other so that no events in the group field are isolated from other events. We sometimes describe this in Gestalt as *co-creation: I create something that is in turn helping to create me* and so on.

So our starting point in terms of Gestalt themes is an attempt to think of and view the group as a here-and-now organism-environment field, in which in which all people, processes and events are influencing all others.

2. Experience has an underlying structure.

Parts and wholes?

Human beings, both in social groups and individually, actively create and organize their experiences, in this way making sense of them. When we look at the nature of this process, we are exploring the underlying structure of experience.

To illustrate this, let us return to the start of the group, mentioned above. As I sit waiting for the group to begin, taking in the sights and sounds as the last few members arrive, it is important to realise what an amazing thing is happening. I am having organised and coherent experiences of a familiar room, of people, of myself. Behind these experiences lies a whole world of physics and biology of which I am at that moment quite unaware. For instance, millions of photons of reflected light are bombarding my retina, conveying information to my central nervous system. And the result of this interaction is my seeing the room and the people? my current visual experience. Of course, I am also taking in information from other senses, making the picture even more complicated. But my experience does not seem unusually complicated. It's just what I am experiencing, and it all seems to make sense: there is nothing out of the ordinary about it.

How is this miracle achieved?

There are different possible ways to answer this question. One way might be the province of psychologists and biologists who specialise in the physiology of perception. They would talk of retinal stimulation, transmission of electrical impulses to the cerebral cortex, and so on. This is asking *why* we experience things as we do, how a particular physiology combines with the physics of light to produce experience.

But as experiential psychologists, (and that is what therapists and counsellors are) we can take another route, and examine the nature of our actual experience more carefully. Instead of asking a *why* question, we ask *how* ones such as: how is human experience structured? Are there elements that are common to all human experience? This approach is called phenomenological psychology, and it is an important aspect of Gestalt therapy theory and practice.

So, despite the mass of information bombarding my senses at any moment, what I experience is a relatively ordered world of chairs, people, group sessions, etc. The original gestalt psychologists noticed the astonishing fact that we experience the world, not as a *blooming buzzing confusion*, but as a coherent field consisting of events and objects in relationship to each other. The word *gestalt* means a whole or pattern. And they realised that experience has a structure: it is organized into patterns of parts and wholes. This is gestalt formation. We experience the world in this way, and human nature can only be understood as a function of these parts and wholes.

Notice that I am not saying that we humans make our worlds up. Experience is always an interaction between me and my environment, and both sides always contribute.

Figures and Grounds

Returning again to the group, I notice that it is time to start, and close the door to signify this. Looking round, I see Jim sitting silently, without his usual energy. I wonder what is up with him. For a few moments, he is the centre of my attention, and stands out for me. At that moment, I do not notice the others in the group. They have momentarily faded into the background.

The Gestalt psychologists realised that human perception has a very particular structure. In our visual fields, for instance, at any given moment, there are some things that we notice and other things which are not noticed, and therefore part of the background. For any shape or object to be perceived and recognised, it must become a *figure* that stands out against a *ground*.

The figure-ground idea is central to Gestalt theory. A gestalt is what it is precisely because it stands out from, has a certain relationship to, its background. Gestaltists actually define meaning in terms of this relationship between figure and ground.

The Gestalt psychologists used the concept of figure and ground and other principles that they identified to explain how we organise and structure our perceptual fields. And it is this process of organisation that interests us as students of human behaviour in the group setting. Of all the things that might have caught my attention as I look round, it is Jim that actually does. My observation of group process has started at this particular point. How does this come about? What influences what is interesting or obvious for me at that moment, or what I, at least for the moment, ignored?

The point is a general one: in perception we do not see all things equally. At any given moment, some things are *figural*, and grab our attention. Then something else stands out for us, and the previous figure recedes into the background. We are continually organising and re-organising our experiences of ourselves and the environment into a series of *meaningful wholes* or *gestalts* in this way. But on what basis do we do this?

Here is a simple example that will begin to provide an answer to that question. Imagine that before the group starts I go out in order to post an important letter. As I walk down the street, I pass a take-

away, and the smell of chips make me so hungry that I am irresistibly drawn towards the shop. I do not even notice the post box in front of it. Later, when I have eaten some chips, I suddenly remember that I have a letter to post, and the bright red post box 'stands out' in my field of vision. Having posted my letter, my sense of urgency to get back for the start of the group reasserts itself, and I walk back to the Centre.

This phenomenon can be described explicitly in terms of figure and ground. When hunger is my dominant need, the sight and smell of food are figural for me, and demand my attention. Other needs I may have (here, to post a letter, to get back to the group in time) are background until my hunger is satisfied, and they then become figure in turn. When the next dominant need is met, it too gives up its place in the limelight and passes into the background.

Identifying this continual organismic figure-ground process was one of the early Gestalt therapists' greatest achievements. They took the Gestalt psychologists' ideas about perception and turned them into a theory of human motivation, which says that my current organismic needs actually shape and *organise* my experience and behaviour.

Put another way, there is a natural sorting-out process that is an essential part of the structuring of human experience. We organise our experiences and actions to form 'meaningful wholes'. Depending on a variety of field factors (which include both our state and that of the environment), at any given moment something *stands out* for us. This now becomes, whether momentarily or for a longer period, the centre of our attention - *figural*. If the figure is a 'good' one, then what we notice will often seem lively, interesting, sharp or clear - these are Gestalt's *autonomous criteria*. But a gestalt can only be as strong as the field conditions allow.

Returning briefly to the group, at the time I make my observation I may or may not consider why my attention has gone to Jim. Sometimes this kind of reflection and analysis is done later, out of the group. But whenever I reflect on this, I may discover that my interest in Jim is not entirely accidental. I have been feeling a bit low in energy myself, and I was looking forward to seeing Jim, whose energy I always enjoy in the group. His relatively subdued demeanour took on a special significance for me for this reason.

It is important to realize just how radical a perspective this is. There are no prescribed ways of seeing the group that do not emerge and take shape from the co-created field and the existing field conditions. There is no Jim unless I and others configure him as Jim. Jim's anger can be just as easily be the focus, or the confusion in the group as people react to him. Whatever we are interested in, motivated to perceive, will tend to stand out for us.

Finally, as I have said, figures do not exist in isolation, but always stand out against a background. The succession of figure/grounds is continually changing over time, depending on changing field conditions. What is now figure becomes ground for the next figure. In Gestalt theory, it is the relationship between the succession of figures and grounds in the phenomenal field that constitutes *the meaning of the situation* for us. In the group context, the purpose of observation is to use our (and other's) figure-ground process to explore and utilise the structure and dynamic of the group field.

3. *The group field is multi-boundaried.*

In Gestalt theory, experience occurs at the boundary between the organism and its environment. This boundary is sometimes called *the contact boundary*, and its operation is what creates the world as we experience it.

Contact, being in touch with objects is the basis of both our sensing of the world, and our action

within it. Contact, in Gestalt theory is 'the simplest and first reality'. It is through this contact that the boundaries that come to define us as human organisms and as people in the world come to be constructed. Let me briefly show how this occurs.

For our purposes, it is useful to think of three different boundaries operating in the formation of experience. First is the so-called *id* boundary. This includes my body-boundary (skin surface) and the sensory organs which operate at it and which give me my basic experience of the world: sights, sounds, smells, surfaces and so on. Next is the *ego* boundary. This is where I begin to get a sense of my self: who I am, what I want. I do this by making choices about which bits of the world are important and interesting to me, and which are not. I identify with some things and alienate myself from others, giving myself a sense of I and not-I. Finally, we have the *personality* boundary. This is about my social self: how others and I would describe or characterize me, what kind of a person I am.

In a group such as a therapy group, we are always operating at the three levels described earlier. In terms of my *id* process, what stands out for me might be a feeling of discomfort, a lump in the cushion I am sitting on, perhaps. I am also sifting other sensory information, noticing the bright colour of a pullover, the whining sound of a voice. I fail to notice someone who sits quietly in a shadowy part of the room.

In terms of *ego* process, some people, and some characteristics of people stand out for me: I feel welcomed by Susan's smile, and smile back at her. I am drawn towards Paul's bright energy, and feel my own rise to meet it. I notice that Jim is unusually quiet this week. I am antagonised by Ann's sarcastic tone, and start to get angry with her. I am constantly making some parts of my environment figural, and paying less attention to others, and this is part of my defining of my self (and of theirs) in this situation.

Finally, in terms of *personality* process, I am feeling pleased to for this group, and communicate my enthusiasm to in the way I interact with group members as we start. Then someone comments that I have recently been more active than usual in the way I have been facilitating. I consider this, wondering if it is true. In these and other ways I manifest a personality in the group, which can develop and change over time.

In the broadest terms, doing therapy is an exploration of human nature as it unfolds itself *here-and-now*: in this group with these people, in this place and time. It is useful in this task to have some underlying theory of what human nature is, and Gestalt therapy theory offers such a theory.

4. The group field is multi-layered.

Both the group leader and the group members are trying, in their different ways, to gain insight into the structure and dynamics of the group field, right here and now. I would like now to consider a way to divide up and focus in on current process that is of particular interest and use to group leaders. This involves identifying three natural *levels* of group life: the individual level, the interpersonal level, and the group-as-a-whole. If the group leader understands these levels, then she can organise her observation and intervention in the group setting by choosing to concentrate, as appropriate and useful, on the behaviour and experience of group members as individuals; on the interactions between individuals, and on the *group-as-a-whole*, the group system.

This distinction between three *levels* of group life is part of the holistic approach, described above. In effect, we are choosing three levels in the infinite hierarchy of life that presents itself to us for study. (We could, of course, extend our study either way, down or up a level, by looking at parts of persons (the brain patterns of group members) or inter-group dynamics (how our group relates to others)). When we choose a level to examine, we in effect temporarily regard the structures and

processes at that level as *wholes* and bracket their *partness*. (This is what the sciences of psychology, social psychology and sociology, respectively, do.) At the individual level, an individual organism (a group member such as Susan) is now seen as a whole, and a person in her own right. Moving up a level, she is also a part of more complex wholes such as the pair comprising Susan and Mark, or the grouping that includes Mark's ally Dave. This in turn is a part of an even more complex (even higher level) whole, the *whole group system*, the *group-as-a-whole*. Each level is *nested in* the one above it.

When we focus on each of the three levels particular classes of contact boundary come to the foreground. So if Susan's *self-other* boundary is foreground for her or us, we are choosing to look at 'individual process'. If we focus on the boundary that links and separates Susan and Mark as they interact, we are attending to the interpersonal process. And if we look at the totality of group interactions then we are considering whole group process. We see different *realities* depending on where we draw the boundary.

I believe that this way of looking at group life in terms of *levels* stems directly from Gestalt's holistic roots. When we talk of levels we are talking about the hierarchical ways in which the group field is structured by natural and social forces, and our attempts as group leaders and members to gain insight into this structure both by how we conceive it and how we act within it.

5. The group has a number of contexts, all of which affect its here-and-now process.

When we talk of context, we are always talking about a number of different field conditions that contribute in different ways to the *actualisation* of group life in a particular *here and now* form. Put more simply, what happens in a particular session of a particular ongoing therapy group depends on a myriad factors, including the group culture, current world events, group member's individual histories, their memories of what happened in the previous session, and so on. Of course, from a field theory point of view, all these factors are seen as having an influence in the here and now. So the past affects me now insofar as I and others have memories of it, and the future is present now in the form of hopes, plans etc.

In an earlier article I offered a model for simplifying and thinking about the multiplicity of contexts that shape the matter and the sense of group life [Philipppson & Harris, 1992, Ch. 4]. In this I considered the group as oriented in space and time. I distinguished four contexts, or zones:

(i) Here and Now: This is what goes on in group sessions, the here-and-now process of the group. In field theory, this is what is *real*, our primary therapeutic focus. A few of the relevant field factors which constitute the group process are: the physical conditions of the group room, group member's current feelings and desires, individual contact styles, contact patterns between individuals (pairs and sub-groups), energy levels and so on.

(ii) There and Now: This zone includes factors relating to the current (spatially) external field in which the group operates. This includes group members' current lives outside the group and between sessions, the location of the group room, events in the world that may be impacting on the group in some way (in the electronic age, spatial distance is irrelevant).

(iii) Here and Then: This refers to the group's history, what has happened to group members in previous sessions. This includes their memories of what has happened, and also fantasies and stories about the past.

(iv) There and Then: This largely refers to the past history of group members - their life stories.

All these zones are part of the total group context in space and time. What happens in group sessions (zone (i)) will be affected by what is happening or has happened in any of the others

insofar as it impinges on *here and now* - the particular goings-on in this particular group on this particular day.

Let me illustrate the practical use of this way of thinking with a simple example from a group. Suppose that a group member, Susan, is feeling irritated in the group. Another group member, Mark, makes a remark to her about her being late for the session, and she 'flares up' at him. What are the contexts that contribute to and shape Susan's here and now expression of anger to Mark?

Start with some contexts from zone (iv). First is the broad social context in which we learn to have and share feelings as we grow up. In our individualistic society, we sometimes forget that human nature is fundamentally and from the outset part of a social and relational web. We are born into, and live our lives as part of, particular human and social structures that we can alter but never escape.

Then there are the more specific contexts of a particular society, culture, neighbourhood and family that socialise us to express feelings in certain ways. Here factors of class, gender, race and so on are highly relevant contributors and shapers.

All these social and cultural conditions help shape Susan's life history - her particular set of experiences and actions - and therefore may have a bearing (greater or lesser, depending on circumstances) on how she feels now. This notably includes the realm of transference into the group situation - for example, Susan reacting to Mark in a certain way because he reminds her of her cruel father, or to the group situation because it reminds her of unhappy incidents in her school class.

Next, moving to zone (ii), we find a range of current factors outside the group that may predispose us to feel a certain way. Perhaps Susan misses her bus, is late, and feels irritated when she arrives at the group. More broadly, she may be currently having a hard time at work, have just embarked on a love affair with a colleague, be worried about her mother's health after visiting her before the group, and so on. Also relevant here is a multitude of general factors relating to 'the state of the nation'. Perhaps the political party Susan supports has lost the election, and this affects her mood, and also that of group members in various ways.

Thirdly, are factors relating to group history (zone iii) . Perhaps Susan is often late, imagines (correctly, as it happens) that some other group members resent this, and feels a mixture of fear and anger in response. Group members' response to her outburst may be coloured by the fact that she has lost her temper in the past, and several are scared of her as a result. Focussing on this particular set of factors leads us to take a developmental view of group life, looking at how the group culture changes over a period of time.

All the factors above lead us, on a field theory approach, to the actuality of the group session. They contribute to the present dynamics of the group field, the particular structure and conditions that it currently, uniquely, has. This structure will tend to make some things *figural*, and keep others background both for individual group members and for the group as a whole. It will encourage some things to happen, and make others unthinkable or 'impossible'.

What actually happens here is that Mark says something to Susan about being late and she flares up. We can now understand how this might happen, and it might even, knowing all we do, seem inevitable - who said 'to understand all is to forgive all'? But - and this is crucially important - the field structure is not deterministic, and will always allow other possibilities simply because the field conditions will inevitably include individual group members who are free human agents, and therefore the possibility of their choosing differently. For example: Susan could have chosen instead to stay silently and secretly irritated for the whole session, and that would have altered the whole group process in turn.

Either way, both what is happening and what is not happening in the group right now is always and utterly part of the overall group field. Both the choice to express anger, or to remain sulkily silent will affect others directly. They have choices about how they will respond to her. The sum total of these choices is the co-created ongoing process of the therapy group.

6. We can discover the nature and structure of the group field both by observation and by systematic experimentation.

When we work in group situations, we are trying to get a sense of what is happening, and use our knowledge to intervene in ways which are beneficial for group members. Our aim is to develop the group as a medium for therapeutic change. Using the field theory language introduced above, we are trying to understand and operate with the current field structure, the forces which currently structure and organise it. Let me outline this idea in a little more detail.

We can envisage the field as consisting of a matrix of interacting forces which might enable a certain thing to happen, or prevent it happening. So a person in the group, perhaps Jim, might feel angry and want to express this, but feel scared to do so. In order to help you grasp the idea more firmly I will list some of the field forces that might be operative.

In this group situation, Jim has a certain desire or urge to express himself in an angry way to Sue because of something she said to him last week. He may also feel fearful of doing so, because he is a bit scared of her response. She also looks a little vulnerable tonight. He may be additionally affected by the fact that someone else is currently talking, and that the group leader is attending to them. Or by past experiences, perhaps even from childhood, which taught him that expressing anger openly is a risky business. Other highly relevant parts of the group *web* in that moment are the group's ongoing norms (habits of behaviour) and shared values that make this event more or less likely to happen. For instance: is this a group in which the open expression of anger is encouraged or discouraged? Is polite interaction valued more than open conflict?

Uncovering the structure of the actual situation is a key task for the leader and the group together. Sometimes this is done by observation, noticing something, perhaps making a comment, and sometimes by an experiment, trying something out to see what happens. When we do this, the underlying structure is often made more visible. A feature of group life that was not in individual or group awareness suddenly becomes figural. For example: if Jim decides to take a risk and express anger to Sue, and there is a group norm about not expressing anger to someone who looks vulnerable, then the group equilibrium becomes disturbed. People are shocked rather than taking it in their stride. What happens is *out of the ordinary*. However, once the norm becomes visible, then we can question it: What's wrong with expressing anger? Is a group in which it's not O.K. to do this useful to us? But the existence of the norm becomes clear only if we take the risk and push at the invisible group boundary.

The more we understand how this process of exploration and discovery works, the more we can systematically endeavour to make the field structure visible by exploration and experiment: 'What will happen if I/you/we...?' Some simple but relevant questions that group leaders and members might ask themselves are:

- * What, in general, seems possible or not possible here and now?
- * What can be done or not done?
- * What can be said or can't be said?
- * What can be felt and what is rarely or never felt?

- * What do we know and what do we avoid knowing?
- * What are the present enabling and restraining forces around possible group events?

7. Everyone has a point of view, and no point of view is inherently preferable to any other.

Field theory offers us a vision of a world in flux, a world of ever-flowing and changing events and processes. From this perspective, each group member is different in every moment, and each situation that occurs in the group is unique. Malcolm Parlett says:

"Circumstances are never quite the same and each of several persons inevitably has a different perspective or vantage point, even if they appear to be located in the same time and place" [Parlett op cit p 72]

So even though a number of people are in a group room together, their phenomenal experiences are all different. They will have different perceptions, needs, desires and backgrounds. No two people will experience the group process exactly the same, and sometimes perceptions will vary very widely indeed. There is therefore no absolute objective *truth* about how the group really is. The best we can hope for is an inter-subjective, negotiated view of what is going on which allows for multiple perspectives.

The implications of this for group processing are profound. Even if we think that a situation is repeating itself, we must recognise this is literally impossible. Every situation and every experience is, if we consider it fully enough, unique, different to any which has preceded it. This does not mean that there are not regularities, that one situation will never resemble another, but that the resemblance is always partial and limited.

Because human behaviour is so complex, there is a long history of attempts to deal with the situation by formulating laws of group process and development, often modelled on physical laws of nature. Such a process is inherently deterministic, and fundamentally flawed. It misses out the primary human characteristic of choice. Without exercising choice I cannot be fully human.

As group therapists we need to accept that there are no rules and recipes that will tell us what to do. Each person, each interaction, each moment of group life is new and fresh. This has important consequences, as Malcolm Parlett points out:

"The honouring of the singularity of each set of circumstances and each person requires, therefore, both respectfulness and also a willingness to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty." [ibid p 72]

So in accepting each moment of group life as unique, we at the same time accept our own uncertainty and ignorance about it.

But this, paradoxically, means that we are able to cast off the shackles of 'knowledge' and be fully present, embracing the moment. We then free ourselves to be creative, to take a new perspective, and feel pleasure in making our own unique contribution to the co-created group situation.

There is an important democratic principle here, which, if understood, is a profound - possibly the main - source of empowerment and healing for group members. In accepting the principle of singularity for ourselves for ourselves, we also accept it for the group members. The group leader's perspective on things is not privileged. His actions have no special magic inherent in them. Despite his importantly different role, he is, in the end, no different to anyone else. Each and every group member has his or her own unique way of being in the group, and experiencing it. Anything that a group member does, anything that happens may turn out to be useful. We are equal partners in the co-creation of the therapeutic potential of the group, and of the experience of each of us and of the

group as a whole. This is a political perspective that I believe can contribute greatly to the therapeutic potency of the group.

8. The observer is always and necessarily part of the situation, and affects the object of study, and vice versa.

From a field theoretical perspective, everyone in the group is part of the field, and everything they do affects the overall process in some way. Notice that this also applies to so-called 'internal events'. My private thoughts are just as much part of the field as ones I express. They affect me, and through me, have an effect on others, as does the very act of my choosing to keep them to myself or speak them out.

In field theory, the so-called objectivity of the observer is a myth. My observing you has an effect on me and on you, whether you are aware of it or not. If I call myself an observer, then I create a role for myself, and also one for you as the object of observation. You may or may not want to go along with this, but you are willy-nilly part of my attempt to structure the situation in a certain way, and you have a choice about how to respond.

In groups we are all observers sometimes, noticing things that happen or do not happen, more or less aware of ourselves, others, the group in the situation. And we are also subject of observation by others. We act, and are acted upon in turn.

This applies to the group leader as much as to any other group member. The group leader has a particular and important role to play in the group, but he always remains part of the group field. The idea that the leader is (or should be) a separate, objective figure who must somehow distance himself from the other group members in order to study them does not fit with a field theory perspective. As Wheatley says:

"No longer, in this relational universe, can we study anything as separate from ourselves. Our acts of observation are part of the process that brings forth the manifestation of what we are observing. [Wheatley 1992: quoted in Brown 1996 p.4]

What this means is that simply by being in the group I am inevitably helping to co-create the group process. Like any other group member, I bring along my own way of being-in-the-world, and throw it into the melting pot. I cannot escape this: what I do and what I choose not to do, what I say and what I refrain from saying, what I notice and what I miss is all necessarily part of the overall process.

The *enmeshment* of the group leader in the group field in this way may seem an undesirable complicating factor. Should not the group leader be *above the fray* in some way? In truth, he can never be. There is no absolutely objective truth, which the leader is supposed to possess because of knowledge, training or experience. But all these things can give us a degrees of objectivity, and simply in having a different role, in being therapist rather than client, the therapist will be behaving and thinking differently.

There is another point that should be made. What can sometimes seem a disadvantage of a field theory perspective, my lack of separateness from the group process, can also be thought of as a huge advantage. If I were not a living, breathing, feeling, connected part of the group field, how could I come to know and understand it? My knowledge of what is happening, whether it comes from attending to others or to my own process, is only possible because in being in the group I am always and inevitably tapping directly into the group field.

9. We should try to distinguish naive experience from theories, hypotheses, assumptions, preconceptions etc.

10. Begin by describing phenomena, rather than trying to explain them.

11. All data are potentially relevant

I will introduce these last three themes together. As experiential psychologists, (and that is what therapists and counsellors are) we work by carefully examining the nature of our and our clients' actual experience. This approach is called 'phenomenological psychology', and it is an important aspect of Gestalt therapy theory and practice.

The three themes above describe principles or rules of observation that are based on phenomenological method. First, a few words of introduction.

Phenomenological method is based on a particular approach to epistemology, the theory of knowledge. It is an attempt to answer the big philosophical questions: What is reality? And how can we know it? Most people probably don't think much about such questions. But they nonetheless show that they do take up a particular philosophical stance. They are unthinking realists who believe that there is an objective world, and that we can acquire direct knowledge of it from our senses. Phenomenology questions this assumption, and states instead that our only source of knowledge is our experiences of the world. These experiences are a result of an interaction between the *raw material* of the world (or field), and our sensing and processing capacities. We can never experience the world except through such an interaction, and therefore never *as it really is*. In fact, there is no one way the world *really* is, but only multiple experiences of it, perspectives on it, interpretations of it. To take a simple example, the world is plainly experienced and interpreted differently by human beings, cats, flies, and fish. Each has their own *life world* (a phrase of Kurt Lewin's).

It is now widely acknowledged that the practice of Gestalt therapy is, in effect, 'clinical phenomenology' [Yontef 1993]. The phenomenological approach provides one main foundation of our approach to understanding and working with group process. Like field theory I believe that it has much to offer in helping us to understand and work with group process in therapy. Its importance here is that it is a methodology directed precisely towards training ourselves to be observers and interveners when we are taking a field-theoretical perspective on group life.

If we take a phenomenological approach, then several things become clear. The first is that our knowledge of the group comes through the experience of all its members. Not just the group leader, but also everyone who is in, and experiencing, the group has something to offer.

Second, since each person in the group has a different experience (to a greater or lesser extent), there is no single truth about what is happening in the group or about group process. If several people have a similar experience, which they then interpret in a similar way, then there will to that extent be a consensual reality, but it is not *the truth* of the situation. To this extent, our experiences and interpretations are always provisional, subject to re-interpretation by ourselves, or with the help of others.

The Gestalt psychologist Wertheimer has a nice description of what he calls *productive thinking* in group situations. According to him, we are trying to go from a situation where the structure of the field hides the way forward, to one in which previously unrecognised relationships or connections become central. Perhaps the group has a feeling of stuckness that we cannot understand, until we realize that several people are feeling angry with the therapist, but are not voicing this feeling. Once we realize that this is happening we have an 'Aha!' experience. So that's what was going on! Suddenly the energy rises, and people start more freely?

We get to this point by clear observation and description and exploration of the total field. Let's see

what this means in a little more detail.

Spinelli [1989, p. 19] lists three steps in phenomenological method:

Step One: The Rule of Epoché

Step Two: The Rule of Description

Step Three: The Rule of Horizontalization

Each of these steps relates consecutively to our last three themes.

7. We should try to distinguish naive experience from theories, hypotheses, assumptions, preconceptions etc.

This is the Rule of Epoché, above:

"This rule urges us to set aside our initial biases and prejudices...to suspend our expectations and assumptions, in short, to bracket all such temporarily so that we can focus on the primary data of our experience" [Spinelli op. cit. p. 17]

In bracketing I try to experience the group and its individual members as they are in that unique moment. I put aside assumptions about the person and the situation, and experience them freshly, as if I had just met them. (Zen writers speak of acquiring a *beginner's mind*.) I try to see them as they are, rather than as I think they are, or should be. I am *open minded*.

What we are trying to learn to do is to see, as far as possible, *what is*, noting and putting to one side as many assumptions or inferences as possible. Thus: I notice that Susan has clenched her fist, and assume she is angry. But I do not know that this is the case: she might be exercising a strained hand. We need to be aware of when we are making a step from an observation to an interpretation or hypothesis about what this means. This is not saying that hypothesising is a bad thing - just that we need to be aware when we are doing it if we are to observe accurately as possible.

Of course it is not possible to completely bracket all biases, preconception or assumptions. Being biased is part of being human, and there are many sources of information about people which later turn out to be inaccurate. But skill in bracketing means seeking to learn about some of our own particular habits and assumptions in certain situations, or with certain people, and trying to put them on one side. Even when this proves especially difficult, simply recognising the omnipresence of bias of all kinds can lessen its impact on us. Supervision is one place where we can learn to do this, but groups in which constructive feedback is supported and encouraged, are also invaluable tools.

This kind of simple, unbiased observation need not be passive, of course. I can seek to collect more data, to fill out my picture of the person or the situation. In the example above I could seek to explore Susan's reality further by asking open questions such as: 'What are you doing with your hand?' or 'How do you feel when you clench your fist?' Simple exploration and experiments helps us and the group members generate more data.

8. Begin by describing phenomena, rather than trying to explain them.

This theme derives from step 2, The Rule of Description, above. I approach any group situation with a range of habitual ways of trying to make sense of my experience, to understand and explain what is going on. Theorising is an important part of understanding group process, but it is done best with adequate data, gathered by uncluttered observation. My initial goal is to remain, as far as possible, at the level of immediate experience, getting as full a sense of what is happening as

possible without jumping to premature conclusions about why it is happening or what it means.

This theme encourages us to initially focus on our immediate and concrete experience, and not to rush to explanations and theories too quickly. Of course, as I have said, we can never escape theorising at a conscious or unconscious level entirely, but we can learn to recognise the continuum between more concrete description at one end, and more abstract theorising at the other. Once we appreciate this, we can combine our observing and theorising more effectively.

9. All data are potentially relevant

This, the Rule of Horizontalization above, encourages us to initially avoid valuing some observations more than others while we are data-gathering. Again, it is part of our natural 'figure ground' process that some things in any group situation will 'stand out' for us as observers. We cannot avoid this process, but we can stand back from it, and try to treat all observations as potentially useful in the formation of an overall picture. We can try to remain interested in what is present, and also what is absent (ground) in the situation. Remember: we do not know at the early stage of an encounter what will turn out to be relevant and important, and what will not. The most unimportant-seeming things later turn out to be crucial. Spinelli uses a nice image to describe this process:

"In a sense, phenomenologists urge us to treat each bit of initial experience as if we have been given the task of piecing together some gigantic jigsaw without the prior knowledge of what image the completed puzzle depicts. In such a situation, it is clear that we cannot say from the outset that one piece of the jigsaw is more important or valid than any other, and so, initially at least, we must treat each piece as having equal significance." [Spinelli op cit p. 19]

To conclude, let me give an example which illustrates the advantages of using phenomenological method.

Once upon a time in a teaching group I noticed a marked lack of energy in the room. People were yawning and seemed to find it hard to concentrate. I quickly assumed that a lack of energy in the group was due to some profoundly stuck group process (I have a tendency to look for complex explanations). Seizing on this 'obvious' conclusion, I then proceeded to take up group time searching for the deep and hidden cause of the 'stuckness': the group were resisting, or there was unexpressed conflict in the room etc. Imagine my embarrassment when someone said: 'There's no air in here. Why don't we open a window?' I had failed to realise that the real cause of the lassitude was simply that the room was stuffy and airless, and that the members needed a break. My love of complex explanations led me to miss the obvious one right under my nose.

How would the three themes have helped me? First, I would have been more aware of, and bracketed off, my tendency to look for a complex psychological explanation when a simple non-psychological one would do. Second, I would have gathered more data before jumping to conclusions. I might have asked people when they started feeling sleepy, have looked around the room, been more in touch with my lack of energy. Finally, I would have allowed my observation of the group field to include physical facts such as the closed windows, lack of air flow and sleepiness of those present as potentially as important as other *psychological* data which I found more interesting, such as their failure to concentrate on my excellent teaching.

This article offers a Gestalt approach to looking at group dynamics. Field theory, as described in the first eight themes, and phenomenological method, as described in the last three themes, together offer us a systematic approach to observing and working with groups. But they are not the only ways to describe and work with group process, and they are no more *true* than any other approaches. Whether you use the Gestalt approach described here, or prefer some other, the

approach you use is a means to an end, and the end is helping you and group members to get greater understanding of the complex and constantly changing facets of the overall group process.

Further Reading

Judith Brown (1996), *The I in Science*, Scandanavian University Press

John Harris [1995], 'Working with Large Groups and Teams', *Topics in Gestalt Therapy* Vol 3 No 2

Malcolm Parlett [1991], 'Reflections on Field Theory', *British Gestalt Journal*, Volume 1 No 2

Malcolm Parlett [1993], 'Towards a More Lewinian Gestalt Therapy', *British Gestalt Journal*, Volume 2 No 2

Peter Philippon & John Bernard Harris [1992], *Gestalt: Working with Groups*, Manchester Gestalt Centre

Peter Philippon [1995], 'Why Shouldn't We Interrupt?', *Topics in Gestalt Therapy* Vol 3 No 2

Ernesto Spinelli [1992] *The Interpreted World: An Introduction to Phenomenological Psychology*, Sage Pubs 1989.

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