1

From a Monopersonal Approach to a Therapy of the Situation

It is the interaction
of the individual
and the environment,
in the sense of
a dynamic field,
which determines
experience
and behaviour.
(www.gestalttheory.net)

1

From a Monopersonal Approach to a Therapy of the Situation

It is, however, important to realise that the whole is not some
'tertium quid' over and above the parts which compose it; it is the parts in their union,
and the new reactions which result from that union. (Smuts, 1926/1996, p. 118)

1.1 Beyond the Individual: The Situation

A Gestalt is not an array of self-contained elements but a configuration of the interacting forces of a field (Arnheim, 1983, p. 8). In a Gestalt conception, there is no such thing as a separate individual or a separate environment (see Figure 1.1). At every moment, a person is necessarily part of a field. His behaviour and his development are a function of the total field, which includes both him and his environment. The environment and the organism stand in a relationship of mutuality to one another (Perls, 1973, pp. 15, 17). This relating is not to be understood as follows: first there is a person and then there is a world, and then there is an interaction between this person and this world (see Figure 1.1).

On the contrary, person and world are inseparable and interdependent parts of a dynamic whole (see Figure 1.2). This dynamic whole can be represented as a double
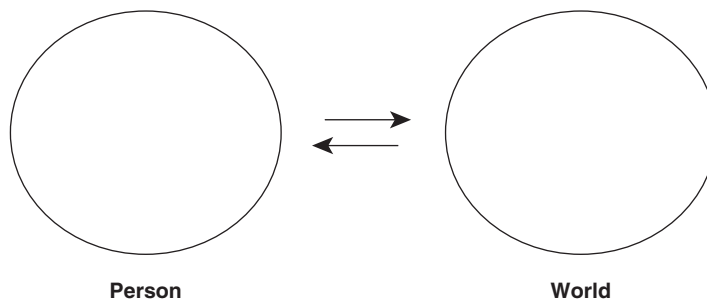

Person   **World**

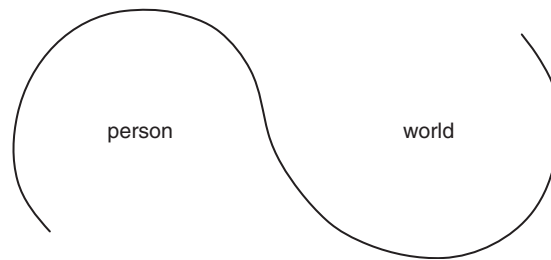**Figure 1.1**   Interaction between person and world

Figure 1.2   The interactional person–world whole

spiral in which the two poles are clearly recognisable and continuously interchange, and it is impossible to point out where one spiral ends and the other begins (Galli, 2000, p. 64). As Gestalt therapists, we concentrate our efforts upon the dynamic interplay of the human being and his phenomenal environment, the dynamic person–world interaction.

This interactional field is the first reality. Gestalt therapy takes the same starting point as Gestalt theory; that is, it treats the person as part of a larger whole.

> The greatest value in the Gestalt approach perhaps lies in the insight that the whole deter-mines the parts … Only the interplay of organism and environment … constitutes the psychological situation, not the organism and the environment separately. (Perls et al., 1951/1994, hereafter abbreviated as PHG, pp. xxviii–xxix)

In the Gestalt approach, the main object of study and intervention is the person–environment interaction. This means that the ultimate client of our psychotherapeutic occupation is the interplay of the person and his phenomenal environment, and this in turn implies that the Gestalt therapist defines personal problems in terms of the inter-actional whole consisting of the person and his world.

This intertexture of interactions of a human being and the environment that is rele-vant to him over a given time interval, I – and also Robine (2002) – choose to call the situation. The term situation is preferable to field because the latter has too many mean-ings; field theory tends to be an umbrella term for a set of different approaches to 'real-ity'. It can refer to the transphenomenal, material, physical field of a physical being and that being's physical environment or it can denote the phenomenal, experienced, behav-ioural, psychological field of a perceiving person and his phenomenal world.

Stemberger (1998) wrote a critical article on the inadmissible mingling and confusion of these different meanings with reference to PHG's use of the concept of the interactional organ-ism–environment field, which the authors also refer to as the psychological situation (PHG, p. xxix; see also Staemmler (2006) on the Babylonian confusion in uses of the word 'field'.)

The term situation is a less contaminated concept. It is a concrete and practical term and relates more closely to the day-to-day experience of clients and therapists. It is a fun-damental notion in the existential–phenomenological literature and refers to the totality of the interwoven relational aspects of a person and his world. It is also a dynamic concept, which in the field-theoretical tradition, especially by Lewin (1935, 1952), is considered synonymous with the concept of the phenomenal, experienced field of a person and his

3

A Definition

Metzger (1975, p. 220) and Lewin (1952, p. 240) adopted Einstein's definition of a field: 'eine Gesamtheit gleichzeitig bestehender Tatsachen, die als gegenseitig voneinander abhängig begriffen werden, nennt man ein Feld'. Lewin speaks of 'a totality of co-existing facts that are considered to be interdependent' and he goes on to add that 'Psychology has to view the life space, including the person and his environment, as one field' (Lewin, 1952, p. 240).

Yontef (1993, p. 297) defines field as: 'A totality of mutually influencing forces that together form a unified interactive whole' and he refers to Lewin's Principle of Relatedness that says a field is always a systematic web of relationships. Behaviour is a function of the field of which it is a part (p. 303).

Parlett (1991, p. 71) uses the word 'situation' as synonym for the word 'field': 'Meaning derives from looking at the total situation, the totality of co-existing facts.'

world over a given interval of time. The situation is formed by a person and his environment and is the unit of psychological investigation in Gestalt psychology. As Lewin stated, 'We deal in psychology with situational units' (1952, p. 52).

Despite their differences, and some of these are considerable, all field theorists agree on this point: they consider the situation the fundamental unit of analysis or investigation (Kebeck and Sader, 1984, p. 214). The core assumptions of a field approach are the interactional definition of the person and his phenomenal environment and the selection of the situation as the unit of analysis (Kebeck, 1983, p. 250).

Phenomenological and existentialist approaches consider the situational relations of the person, his environment and its institutions as the object of psychological study. Concreteness is defined in terms of what the person spontaneously considers as belonging to his situation. Behaviour is always a meaningful action in a current, concrete situation. To sound out someone's behaviour, including so-called pathological behaviour, we need not look for causal relations but for relations that manifest meaning. Behaviour should be derived from a totality of co-existing facts constituting a dynamic unity. Behaviour depends on neither the past nor the future, but on the present dynamics of the field (Lewin, 1952, pp. 25–7).

1.2 Person and Environment Constitute a Situation

The organism, as part of the situation, is not a mere physical entity, but the subjective, phenomenal person who behaves and invests the world with meaning. In the foreword to his landmark book *La phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. xi) states: 'Il ne faut pas se demander si nous percevons vraiment un monde, il faut dire au contraire: le monde est ce que nous percevons' (The question is not if we perceive a world; on the contrary, the world is what we perceive).

A Dramatic Story

Koffka illustrated with a dramatic story that the environment, as part of the phenomenal situation, is not the geographical or physical environment, but the behavioural environment, the environment one experiences, lives in and behaves in:

> On a winter evening in the middle of a driving snowstorm, a man on horseback arrived at an inn, happy to have reached a shelter after hours of riding over the windswept plain on which the blanket of snow had covered all paths and landmarks. The landlord who came to the door viewed the stranger with surprise and asked him whence he came. The man pointed in the direction straight away from the inn, whereupon the landlord, in a tone of awe and wonder, said: 'Do you know that you have ridden across the Lake of Constance?', at which point the rider dropped stone dead at his feet. (Koffka, 1935, p. 28)
>
> Koffka asks the reader in what environment in the above vignette the behaviour of the stranger took place. Yes, it is true that he rode across the lake, but the fact that there was a frozen lake, and not ordinary ground, did not affect his behaviour in the slightest. His behaviour would have been just the same had the man ridden across a barren plain. Since the man died from sheer fright after having heard what he had 'really' done, we can infer that his riding behaviour would have been very different from what it actually was if he had been aware of the physical environment. Therefore, we must conclude that effectively he did not ride across the lake at all; instead he rode across an ordinary snow-swept plain. His conduct was a-riding-over-a-plain behaviour, not a-riding-over-a-lake behaviour.
>
> The environment as part of my situation is the environment of my phenomenal, experienced behaviour. In other words, my behavioural environment is the environment that, in conjunction with me, constitutes my particular situation (Koffka, 1935, p. 30 ff.).

What is important for the investigation of dynamics is not to abstract from the situation but to focus upon the singularity and concreteness of the particular situation, in which the factors of the total dynamic structure are clearly to be discerned (Lewin, 1935, p. 31). To understand the dynamics of a process, we have to comprehend the entirety of the situation involved, along with all its elements and characteristics (Goldstein, 1935/1995; Lewin, 1935, p. 31). The dynamics of a process are always to be derived from the reciprocal relations of the concrete individual and the concrete environment, which together constitute the concrete situation (Lewin, 1935, p. 41).

Questions

- Do we, the neighbours and I, live in the same street? Geographically? In terms of experience? Behaviourly?
- Do we, my siblings and I, have the same father? Biologically? In terms of experience?

'In order to understand a man, we must know how he is related to the world and how his relationship to it works' (Wertheimer, in Luchins and Luchins, 1978, vol. 2, p. 145; see also Van den Berg, 1955). During my studies at the University of Leuven, I became familiar with the relational view of the human being and the interactional aspects of personal behaviour, motivation and human personality. The ideas articulated by Professor Joseph Nuttin come close to the basic concept of Gestalt theory: *the interaction*

of person and world is the first and the only reality to be studied. 'Person' and 'world' are defined as two poles of an interactional unity. The fundamental personality structure is the dynamic person–world unity and not some internal organisation of a self isolated from the environment (Nuttin, 1953, pp. 434–6; 1965, pp. 222–34).

'Consciousness does not refer to an internal world, but consists of the awareness and acknowledgement of person–world interactions, how we are affected by the world and how the relationship manifests itself at the moment, and what in this situation needs to happen' (Nuttin, 1955, p. 350). Put more simply, man, at any moment, finds himself in a world. He and his world together constitute meaningful situations. Man is not a structure enclosed within himself, but essentially an exposure to his world. This conceptualisation underpins the potential for human beings to meet the world and the possibility of behaviour as a way of dealing with the world.

Like the Gestalt theorists, Nuttin stressed that the world that we perceive is not the material physical world. For human beings, the presence of a meaningful world is a psychological, behavioural fact (Nuttin, 1955, p. 350). Consciousness means precisely this exposure of the person and the world to each other or, in other words, the presence of the world as it presents itself to our senses in the form of a present that cannot be refused. Lack of consciousness, therefore, means enclosure within the realm of physical and biochemical reactions (p. 351).

In a not-so-well-known interview with Walker (1971), Fritz Perls stated that contrary to what many people think, the focus of Gestalt therapy is not on self-awareness. Interventions meant solely for enhancing the awareness of what is in me, as a separate entity, have nothing to do with what Fritz Perls means by Gestalt therapy, which highlights the client's awareness of his total situation: 'If you are in touch only with yourself, you miss the world; if you are in touch only with the world, you miss yourself, so that ecological unity cannot be established' (p. 184). The focus of interest is not on the state of the inner courtyard of an isolated self, but the process of contact in which the person–environment interaction takes shape.

Man finds himself not only in the presence of a world, but also present to himself. The presence to himself can be called reflective consciousness. This is another sense in which man can escape 'enclosedness' within himself. The very fact of being able to self-reflect prevents man from being enclosed within his reactions to the environment. Through reflection, a person 'goes out' of himself. This enables him to look at himself and the world from different points of view and to intervene in the course of the development of his relationship to his world. He is therefore able 'to restructure his relationship to the environment' (Nuttin, 1955, p. 352).

This is precisely what happens in psychotherapy. Wertheimer sees the ability to restructure a situation, the ability to look at a situation from another standpoint, as essential for creativity (1945/1959). Consciousness and behaviour are not to be opposed to one another; rather, the two are inextricably bound up with one another: being aware of the world is already 'dealing with the world through behaviour', and behaviour–response itself is awareness or 'realised presence to the world' (Nuttin, 1955, p. 353). In this conceptualisation, the fundamental notion is not the organism but the network of relationships, which the organism and the environment interactively build together as two correlative parts.

Consequently, Nuttin does not define the human personality as an internal organisation of traits, attitudes and behavioural consistencies; the structure of personality goes

far beyond its internal organisation. Personality is a way of being and behaving in a world that exists for the person who has that personality.

Nuttin calls the fundamental structure of the personality the 'ego-world unity' (1955, p. 353). Personality conceived of in this way provides us with a sound basis for a theory of motivation. Many psychologists locate needs *in* the organism. From the relational perspective, needs are considered as basic patterns of relationship in a given situation.

Needs have to be defined from a *relational* point of view. Basically, they are general modalities of reciprocal relationships of the person and the world that manifest themselves through specific interactions demanded by a given situation. These modalities are referred to as needs because a situational failure is elicited if an organism does not succeed in establishing one of these types of relationships. The organism strives in a variety of ways for certain kinds of relationships because its functional structure is itself comprised of these modes of interaction (Nuttin, 1955, p. 354; 1964, pp. 64–5).

Nuttin distinguishes two aspects of this interaction. Firstly, there is the dynamic orientation, which directs the behaviour towards specific elements of the environment. This directedness is correlated with the demand character of given elements of the environment. It can be said that the environment presents those of its qualities that are needed by the person (cf. Lewin's concept of the reciprocal relationship between needs and demand characters).

Second, directed behaviour is not discharged blindly into the world. The person is able to perceive, to explore, to recognise, to select, to imagine and to plan. Nuttin calls the entirety of these actions the cognitive function or the informative and coordinating aspect of the interaction of the person and his environment. Through this function, motivation points to its dynamic preferential goals. Information is not only a matter of cognition but also of emotion and feelings. I am here referring to the idea of affective knowing about the world.

The Gestalt-theoretical approach regards all psychic events, problems and solutions as comprehensible only as parts of a person's total situation (*Gesamt-situation*). Only the forces in the present situation are relevant as far as study and therapy or change is concerned (Lewin, 1935; Gross, 2000, p. 116). A situation is always novel, and the novelty of each situation demands a creative adjustment of its parts. 'All contact is creative adjustment of the person and the environment.' Psychopathology 'is the study of accidents in the course of creative adjustment' (PHG, p. 6).

1.3 Forces in the Situation

We must be able to focus as needed upon the individual or the environment, i.e. since exclusive focus on the individual, for example, would place him psychologically at the centre of the universe and place his values entirely within himself. We therefore have recourse to concepts like forces. It is high time that we revised current ego-centred theories of motivation, which are based mainly on tension reduction, so that we can make way for other field forces. Once this concept is introduced, we can study what is happening from the stance of the whole situation. An organism is not driven exclusively by internal forces, nor is it pushed around exclusively by external forces. Forces originating from the environment always operate in conjunction with forces originating from the ego (Henle, 1961, p. 291).

Every situation contains forces that do not emanate from the person himself but are part of the environment and influence the person's experience and behaviour. Such forces have to be taken into account when we try to understand an individual's present behaviour. Wertheimer, in agreement with Lewin, favours the term 'vector' to indicate those situational forces, conditions or factors that influence a person's behaviour. Vector is a broader term than drive. A person's urge or drive can also be a situational force, but in the drive concept there is an implicit assumption that the motivational behaviour is directed by the attempt to satisfy an egocentric need or quest for meaning (Wertheimer in Luchins and Luchins, 1978, vol. 2, pp. 258, 365).

We live in a world and the things and persons in this world are not neutral for us; they have properties for us in our role of acting beings. This observation is true not only with regard to the ease or difficulty with which we can manipulate them; many objects and settings which we encounter confront us with a will of their own: they challenge us to act in a certain way towards or on them (Lewin, 1926/1999, p. 95); it is as if they were 'telling' us what to do with them (Koffka, 1935, p. 353). For example, good weather and scenic landscapes entice a tourist to go for a walk; a bench invites a fatigued walker to sit, a stairway a two-year old child to climb it, a front door a visitor to open and then close it, a dog its master to pet it, a piece of chocolate cake a gourmet to eat it, and so the list goes on.

All these objects and settings have a demand character (*Aufforderungscharakter*). The demand character and needs are correlative concepts. Environmental objects can maintain particular relations to needs as a function of their positive or negative demand characters (Lewin, 1929/1999, p. 123).

Parts and Pieces

Arnheim (1954/1974) tells the story of the master cook Chaung Tzu whose cleaver remained sharp for 19 years because when he carved an ox, he did not cut arbitrarily but respected the natural subdivision of the animal bones, muscles and organs.

In response to the barest tap at the right interstices, the parts seemed almost to detach themselves. The Chinese prince, listening to his cook's explanation, said it had taught him how to proceed successfully in life (Arnheim, 1954/1974). To know how to distinguish between pieces and parts is indeed a key to success in most human occupations, Arnheim states (pp. 76–7).

Parts

In a purely quantitative sense, any section of a whole can be called a part. But in Gestalt theoretical terms, one only speaks of 'genuine' parts, that is, sections, representing a segregated sub-whole within the total context (Arnheim p. 77):

A person is one part of the whole that we call 'situation'.

And the phenomenal environment is another part of the 'situation'.

To partition by mere amount or number is to ignore structure.

The situation is constantly being organised by the reciprocal relations of the interacting parts. Just as an individual's needs influence the way in which he maps the world,

environmental forces affect the needs of a person. Goodman expressed it like this: the energy for the Gestalt formation 'comes from both parts of the field, i.e. both the organism and the environment' (PHG, p. 182). The figure-ground process is a dynamic one in which the imperatives and resources of the field progressively lend their powers to the interest of the dominant figure (PHG, p. 7), which Goodman specifies as follows: the urgencies and resources of the field and not the urgencies and resources of the individual.

Lewin's dictum that 'the need organises the field' can be reversed: 'the field shapes the need' (Malcolm Parlett, personal communication). This reversibility approaches Lewin's conception of the reciprocal relationship between needs and demand characters. He stated: 'The two propositions "this or that need exists" and "a given range of objects or settings present demand characters for certain actions" are equivalent' (Lewin, 1926/1999, p. 97). The demands of the total situation organise the field as in the figure-ground process, i.e. the process of forming a Gestalt is a field process. Wertheimer speaks of the *Zueinander*, the matching of the action and the demands of the total situation. In every instance of contact of a person with his world, a total situation is resolved anew on the basis of the needs of their interconnection (Wertheimer, 1935/1961, p. 35).

Referring to Köhler (1947), who pointed out the necessity of distinguishing between the *locus* and the *reference* of experiences, Henle (1961), in an article titled 'On Field Forces', identified motivational forces arising from parts of the psychical situation, exclusive of those arising within the person. While all experiences presuppose processes in the person, they need not all be directed or refer to the person; they may be directed/refer to the perceived environment (Henle, 1961, p. 286). Wertheimer (1935/1961) applied the same distinction to problems of motivation: motivational forces may be located in the person, but they may refer to parts of the situation other than the person; they may arise from the experienced demand of the situation, not from egocentric interests (pp. 39–40).

It would be more useful to speak of environment-referring situational forces whenever forces initiating our actions seem to arise mainly from parts of the situation other than ourselves, and of person-referring situational forces whenever our actions arise from ourselves as parts of a situation. But whether environment- or person-referring forces are involved, both person-related and environmental conditions operate. When person-referring forces are primary, the role of the environment is to provide objects and settings that generate incentive and the means of procuring the person's satisfaction or else of overcoming the barriers to such satisfaction. Even if all motivational forces are viewed as referring to the individual, it is important to distinguish between ego-referent forces *in the service of the whole situation* and ego-referent forces *in the service of the individual alone.*

Henle concludes that so close is the cooperation of the two kinds of forces that it is perhaps more accurate to speak of the dual aspects of all motivation. A certain level of satisfaction of a person's needs is necessary before the individual can respond to environmental demands. Conflicts may arise between environmental demands and person-related demands, between various personal needs, and also between simultaneous active environmental forces.

Personal needs can blind someone to what is required of him in a specific situation or, conversely, demands can be so strong that they can blind the individual to his own real needs. In both cases, no conflict is experienced. The following contrasting scenarios can then arise:

- An individual may be so involved in a personal problem that he cannot attend properly to his work, or is not interested in other matters at all, or may be immune to the demands of the environment.
- Churchill was so caught up in directing military operations in World War II that he 'forgot' he had a family. In a very real sense, the war was running Churchill every bit as much as Churchill was running the war.
- The concepts of person-referring and environment-referring forces do not imply that one should take precedence over the other. The distinction between personal needs and the requirements of the situation has nothing to do with moral judgements; there are instances in which the needs of a person are objectively more pressing than the demands of the situation and there are cases in which the priorities are the reverse (Henle, 1961, p. 292, footnote 5).

1.4 The Requirements of the Present Situation

The situation is comprised of the totality of psychologically relevant data over a given interval of time and forms a dynamic unity of the person and his life space. It is this life space that we have in mind when we refer to motivation, needs, tasks, intentions, wishes, expectations, safety, anxiety, habits or patterns of behaviour and thinking. The life space also contains the views of the person about his future and past. Gestalt theorists derive all vectors not from single isolated objects, but from the mutual relations of the factors constituting the whole (see Lewin, 1935, p. 41). The possibility that past events are influencing the present situation of a person is by no means denied by a Gestalt theory-oriented therapist, but he does not *focus* on an analysis of the past. He is cautious about connecting present maladaptations with hypothesised early events.

What is attempted in the Gestalt approach is to identify the person-related and environment-related conditions that are likely to contribute significantly to an understanding of a person's *current* responses. The therapist tries with the client to reconstruct the latter's situation in such a way that the client is able to actively explore his life space and to recognise the obstacles and impediments that oppose awareness of the situational demands upon him.

The dynamics of an event are not related to an isolated object or setting, but are dependent upon the whole situation in which either of these occurs. It is a matter of common experience that it is the dynamic relationship which makes the subject move toward or away from an object or setting and Köhler suggests that the term motivation should be reserved for this relationship (Köhler, 1959/1961, p. 11). Wertheimer states that 'the vectors often arise in actual situations from the requirements of the total situation, not only from egocentric interests' (Wertheimer, 1935/1961, p. 29).

This statement implies that the sign of a responsible personality is not necessarily the fulfilment of the ego. It may be just as important for a person's development to satisfy the field conditions as it is to meet the needs and urges of his ego. Wertheimer clarifies this point as follows: 'To understand whether a person is fulfilling himself we need to study the particular person in the particular situations of his life and study how the requirements of each (of those situations) are met' (Wertheimer in Luchins and Luchins, 1978, vol. 2, p. 280).

Every situation invites us to respond to the demands of the totality. Our acts are influenced by those demands rather than by personal egoistic drives only. The environmental

part of the situation is not the objective physical world outside, but the phenomenal world, the world as the person perceives it and experiences it and as it impacts upon the person. It is the world that a person feels and interprets, the world that continuously invites the person, and, at the same time, the world that the person continuously creates. The person relates primarily to *his* world, not to someone else's world (see Koffka's dramatic story above). When he does relate to another's world, it is through comparisons with his own world, for example in empathic and antipathic processes.

The following observations suggest a positive and optimistic view of man's relating to the world (Fuchs et al., 1997, p. 194; Stemberger, 2002, pp. 8–9):

Even when severely disturbed, ill, injured or handicapped, a person tends to (re)construct his situation in the best possible way (law of *Prägnanz*: tendency towards self-organisation or the best form).

- There is a natural order intrinsic to the situation and this order is related to the situational demand characteristics referred to above. It is part of the human condition: 'Being a part of a situation is identical to existing as a human being' (Buytendijk, 1954, pp. 7–8); 'A subject is nothing other than a possibility of situations' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 467).
- A person is capable of recognising the demands of his situation and under favourable conditions can respond appropriately to them.
- The tendency to respond to the demands of the situation arises from the structure of the situation (of which the person is an active part) and not from the subjective needs of an isolated person. Situational demands and the ability of the individual to respond to them can be studied only in relation to each other.
- Even the most detailed understanding of the structure or functioning of the personality and the most extensive knowledge of the environment are insufficient to grasp the essence of the particular situations a human being is part of, for it is the interplay of the person and his environment that constitutes the core of the psychological situation (PHG, p. xxviii).
- When we talk about studying and describing the situation of the client, we do not mean describing the situation in physical, objective terms, but reflecting about how this situation is experienced by this individual over a given interval of time (Kebeck and Sader, 1984, p. 213).

1.5 Investigating the Total Current Situation of a Person

A current event is derived from the dynamic factors that operate in a concrete situation. 'We no longer seek the "cause" of events in the nature of a single isolated object, but in the relationship between an object and its surroundings' (Lewin, 1936, p. 11). We read the same in PHG:

We must start from the interacting of the person and its world. Let us call this interacting 'the person/world field'. Neither the full understanding of the organismic functions nor the best knowledge about the environment covers the total situation. Only the interplay of person and world constitutes the psychological situation; the isolated person and its abstractions (mind, soul, body) and the isolated environment are the subject of many sciences (e.g. physiology, geography etc.; they are not the concern of psychology). (PHG, p. xxix)

The Life Space Situation

Lewin's conviction is that one cannot isolate a person from his environment (his world). He uses the terms 'psychological situation' and 'life space' synonymously as referring to the totality of actual and potential events, the totality of interdependent facts which determine the behaviour of an individual at a certain moment (1936, p. 14). The life space is the concretisation of a person's more general life situation and the life situation is, in turn, the relatively constant and remote background of the given situation, and can become part of the immediate situation. It affects the state of the person and thereby his reactions in the momentary situation.

The life space consists of all the aspects of the interactions of the person and his environment at a certain point in time t. Therefore, $B = f (St)$. Since for Lewin, situation and life space are synonymous, we can re-express this formula as $B = f (Lt)$, where the psychological life space (L) indicates the totality of facts that determine the behaviour (B) of a person at a given point in time (t) (1936, pp. 12–14).

'Meaning derives from looking at the total situation, the totality of co-existing facts' (Parlett, 1991). Only those facts that are actively present in a person's situation can influence the person–environment interaction. The psychical past and psychical future are parts of the psychical situation at a given time t. When we study the situation of an individual, we must not forget that only those facts are active that currently exist for the person. The time perspective is continually changing (Lewin, 1952, p. 54).

A person's situation always reflects the socio-cultural world of the community he belongs to and the world he creates together with others. It is a person's situation that is disturbed and so it is the situation that needs to be restructured. Restructuring the situation does not imply repairing or fixing things so that they become what they were originally, but enabling the total situation to bring about the conditions that will enable all the constituent parts to develop.

It is generally agreed that social, political and economic conditions as well as the physical aspects of the environment greatly impact on the incidence of mental and psychic disturbance and illness. Nevertheless, in the great majority of cases, psychotherapists and other mental health specialists and professionals in other sectors continue to emphasise the treatment of the individual. Most of the time, the focus is on the individual's inner states and readiness or ability to cope with the difficulties of his situation. The word 'dis-ease' fits in with this emphasis: the person is not at ease, is not comfortable, and is not well enough equipped to confront the surrounding world; it is the *person* who is not doing well.

Despite their emphasis on the unitive interactional field, most Gestalt therapists still consider that illness is a category of psychological disturbance that applies to individual persons, i.e. a problem that they and they alone have. In doing so, they perpetuate a tradition of locating 'symptoms' within an individual 'patient' who suffers, rather than investigating the situation of which the individual is a part and in which his problems have arisen. Seldom is there mention of the *suffering situation*. If a person is suffering, he is suffering from his situation, from the interactions with his world and consequently his situation is suffering from him too.

Gestalt therapists avoid dichotomies such as conscious and unconscious, inner and outer, person and world, and mind and body. PHG are explicit about this: there is no such thing as inner conflict (p. 134); every conflict is a conflict in the interactional person–world situation and every disturbance is a disturbance of the ongoing situation. Such disturbances dis-order the relationship of a person to his world.

Gestalt theory invites the therapist to think, and consequently to act, from the perspective of the total situation. It is inconceivable that a tree surgeon, for example, would claim that diseases arise independently in individual trees as the result of an impaired arboreal metabolism, a weak constitution, deficient resistance, and so on; trees are not, and cannot be, independent of the ground of environmental influences in which they are rooted.

Disorders are all too often regarded as an individual and intra-individual matter. The suffering, the pain, the problem is located within the body (soma), the mind (psyche), or both (psychosoma). We mistake the locus of a disturbance, which seriously distorts our perception of the disturbance. It is the locus that is seen as being in trouble or defective. An important illusory 'advantage' of this way of thinking is that it absolves both the individual and his network of all social responsibility; neither of them engages with the socio-cultural environment of which the person is a part.

Gestalt theory stresses that it is the interplay of person and environment that is disordered. The loss of a rich repertory of responses in relating to the world is the real 'disease' – a shrinking or petrifying (a 'mineralisation', as Sartre would have it) of the freedom to interact. The person is not a disturbed body, nor a disturbed soul; in so-called 'psycho'therapy, we deal with disturbed relations to the world (see Chapter 3).

1.6 Gestalt Therapy: A Therapy of the Gestalting Process

For Gestalt-therapeutic purposes, Goodman, consistent with the Gestalt-theoretical tradition, highlights the interdependence of the parts of a whole. He compares this dynamic interdependence of person and world to a continuous and dynamic figure-ground process (gestalting), in which the urgencies and resources of the situation progressively lend themselves to the formation of the figure against its ground (PHG, p. 7).

Therapy based on Gestalt theory focuses on *a fundamental question*: What does a particular situation need in order for it to be restructured in such a way that the person–environment interaction is more satisfying?

The answer to this question demands an approach that is very different from that of a psychotherapy that concentrates its efforts on the disturbances of an individual, i.e. disturbances that are located exclusively in the personal space or in the behaviour of that individual.

A therapy is needed that does not intervene in one of the constituent parts of the situation to the exclusion of the others. Rather, a therapy is required that intervenes in the interaction of the situational parts and in the interaction of these parts with the whole that they are a part of. In the past, most psychotherapies have attempted to impact on the inner world of the person (mental or psychic processes and conflicts). They regarded problems with the internal housekeeping of the person as maladjustments of the person's 'psyche' to his environment; it was not considered that the social environment could be maladjusted to the person.

Labelling a healing approach 'psycho'therapy suggests that the disturbance is located inside the psychic, mental apparatus of a person, and so it is perhaps time to change this label. Gestalt therapy, by contrast, does not need to change its name. The term Gestalt says exactly what therapy is about: focusing on the gestalting of the situation and intervention in those elements of the total situation that are most likely to be disturbing the functioning of the whole. These elements can be person-related, but also world-related

in terms of the experience of my world (persons, groups, communities, structures and physical surroundings).

A Gestalt-theoretical therapist, rather than being a facilitator of a person's psychic processes only, chooses to be *a facilitator of the person's situations*. When he works with individuals, even though they are individuals, he is constantly and acutely aware that they are part of a situation and that this situation can also be eased or ordered by intervening in elements of the situation other than the individual person.

In the person–world interaction, it is impossible and pointless to define what belongs to the person and what to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 517). No matter how deeply we dig into our psyche, we will find our world at each layer of the excavation, i.e. the norms, cultural and political values, etc. of the community to which we belong.

Disturbances should be considered as belonging to the situation (PHG, p. 134), which means that the interactional process involving the person and his world is disturbed and the developmental process has stagnated. The situation has not been completed in such a way that person and environment are adjusted satisfactorily and creatively to one another.

Well-being cannot be compartmentalised. For phenomenological therapists – and Gestalt therapists must be counted among these – behaviours which are labelled by terms such as psychotic and neurotic are ways of coping with the world in severe life situations, ways that fulfil important needs and reduce or avoid the anxiety that accompanies them. Gestalt theory holds that for 'healthy' functioning, an individual needs to find a meaningful place, role and function in society, and that a lack of meaningful functioning as a social being is a source of disturbance (Crochetière et al., 2001, p. 151; Wollants, 1984). In other words, well-dealing brings about well-being, and not the other way around.

Parlett (1995) talks about the paradigm shift in psychotherapy from a focus on the individual to a focus on connectedness. In the individualistic perspective, a person is described variously as 'resistant', 'reluctant' or 'avoidant'. The field-theory based perspective of connectedness relieves the individual of the burden of a stigmatising label by taking the environment into account. Refusal to engage in the therapeutic process is then seen as a sign of insufficient support from the field rather than an individual problem.

Already in 1948, Abraham Luchins, an American Gestalt theorist, was writing on this subject: 'Contemporary psychotherapy usually centres on the dynamics of the individual (…) rather than on the dynamics of the social field and the manipulation of this field for therapeutic purposes (…) The individual is the variable to be manipulated (…) so that he is better able to understand himself and his disorders, and to adjust to (and perhaps manipulate) the environmental condition (…) Personal conflicts are so often due to conflicts in the objective situations themselves. The therapeutic session is only one kind of a situation, and therefore does not necessarily prevent the patient's subsequent failure when he or she confronts the other situations of which his life is comprised (…) Even in group therapy, one cannot begin to place the patient in all the situations of his life. Even when we facilitate the transfer application of the group experiences to his existence outside the group sessions, the person is doomed to fail when he returns into a system, community, or cultural ground that has not changed' (Luchins, 1948, pp. 424–5).

14

In the interview with Walker (1971, p. 186), Perls makes the same point when he says that psychotherapy is not an appropriate term to describe what is required. Mental diseases are just one kind of disturbance amongst the totality of disturbances of the interactional person–world. Therefore, the term psychopathological is also inadequate because the so-called psychic disorders are never solely psychic, mental or spiritual. They are disorders of the interaction or disturbed relations of the person–world. In response to this state of affairs, Gestalt treatment aims at a gestalting or restructuring of these relations as the subject of therapy. If we look at a person and his phenomenal environment, as parts of a situation, 'we cannot lay the blame for the alienation at the door either of the individual or of the environment (…) Since individual and environment are merely elements of a single whole, i.e. the field, neither of them can be held responsible for the ills of the other' (Perls, 1973, p. 26).

Lewin was convinced that a change in the environment could have great significance for a child's development. He believed that in situations in which there are conflicting vectors, it will try to escape by exiting the field. A Gestalt therapist can choose to intervene by focusing mainly on the person, on the environment or on both, or on the interplay of person and environment. As long as the treatment does not exclude any of these factors in favour of the others, the term Gestalt therapy is justified, i.e. Gestalt therapy is not limited to psychotherapy and accordingly can be used effectively to establish conditions that will restore the kind of interactions needed to creatively restructure a situation.

It is obvious that in a consistent view of pathological developments, account must be taken of the so-called pathological, not as an element per se, but in terms of a disturbance to a meaningful interchange between person and environment. Many misconceptions and many mistreatments could have been avoided if each event had been considered as embedded in a totality, as a part of a whole, having a function and having meaning in that whole (Wertheimer, 1927/1991, p. 53).

To a much greater extent than we currently do, we need to consider what therapeutic interventions could be made in our clients' situations and how their social environment could be reorganised. If we did that, instead of excluding the mentally ill from society by putting them into hospitals, just as we unload the elderly into old-age homes and problematic youths into correctional institutions, more of them would regain their well-being (see Wertheimer, in Luchins and Luchins, 1978, vol. 2, p. 140).

Synthesis

1 I am always a part of the situation.
2 The situation is a dynamic whole consisting of interacting forces arising from my phenomenal world and from me.
3 From the beginning, I am not an individuated person, over and against an outside world, as there is not an environment that is separate from me.
4 My environment and I constitute a whole, and the laws of holistic processes that are cooperative in this situation tend toward a meaningful behaviour of its parts.

(Continued)

15

(Continued)

5 My development as a person and my concrete behaviour can be understood properly only as a function of the total situation.
6 The basic unit of exploration and investigation – and therefore of therapy – is the experience of myself and of all the other elements that influence my situation at a given moment.
7 I am not the only part of a situation; I am always part of a situation together with other people.
8 As regards the creation of a balance between forces arising from the person and other forces arising from the experienced environment, the others and I depend on one another.
9 When this interactional dynamic balance is hindered, difficult or impossible, the situation becomes disordered for the parts involved. Mental disorders are related to a disturbance of the creative adjustment of the 'between'.

'We no longer seek the "cause" of events in the nature of a single isolated object, but in the relationship between the object and its surrounding (…) One can hope to understand the forces that govern our behaviour only if one includes in the representation the whole psychological situation' (Lewin, 1936, pp. 11–12).

Recommended Further Reading

Gold, M. (1999). *The Complete Social Scientist: A Kurt Lewin Reader*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association/London: Tavistock Publications.
Lewin, K. (1935). *A Dynamic Theory of Personality: Selected Papers.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
Lewin, K. (1952). *Field Theory in Social Science.* London: Tavistock Publications.
Parlett, M. (1991). Reflections on Field Theory. *The British Gestalt Review*, 1(1), 69–81.
Parlett, M. (1993). Towards a More Lewinian Gestalt Therapy. *The British Gestalt Journal*, 2(1), 115–20.
Perls, L. (1992). *Living at the Boundary*. Highland, NY: The Gestalt Journal Press.
Wheeler, G. (2002). *Beyond Individualism: Toward a New Understanding of Self, Relationship and Experience.* Hillsdale, NJ: Gestalt Press.