Gestalt Group Process

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Foreground

In this chapter I describe what I call "Gestalt group process," which integrates the principles and practices of Gestalt therapy and group dynamics. It is a model in which the leader wears bifocal lenses, paying attention to the development of the individuals in the group and to the development of the group as a social system. From this perspective, the group is regarded not just as a collection of individuals, but as a potent psychosocial environment which profoundly affects the feelings, attitudes and behaviours of the individuals in that system, and conversely, is profoundly affected by the feelings, attitudes and behaviours of the individual in that system. The chapter is divided into two sections: The first part deals with some personal and historical antecedents, and the second part with the theory and practice of this bifocal approach to personal development in groups.

Part I. Background

This chapter actually began five years ago, when, halfway through a three day Gestalt personal growth workshop I was leading, a disgruntled member jumped up from his chair, strode in front of me and shouted "This is not a real Gestalt group, and you are not a real Gestalt leader!". I took a deep breath, centred myself in my chair, and asked him to specify his complaints. In rapid fire succession, he catalogued them. He said that I had not used the empty chair, not even once, that I had discouraged him from working on a dream at the opening session until more support for this had developed in the group, that I had allowed individuals to give feedback to one another and to engage in other forms of "bullshit."

Needless to say, I had mixed reactions to this confrontation. One part of me felt defensive and wanted to give him a detailed resume of my credentials as a Gestalt therapist and group leader. Another part, the group leader, welcomed the challenge. His behaviour meant that the group, through one of its members, was testing out the boundaries of authority. By taking a stand against me as leader, this person was setting a new norm and perhaps moving the group toward increasing differentiation and autonomy. I was from this perspective that I responded. However, I was left with strong feelings of frustration mixed with despair. The

question that formed in my mind was, "How has it come about that so many have mistaken the medium for the message in Gestalt, and have confused the techniques and gimmicks for the essence of the method?" In this chapter, I attempt to answer my own question, and to deliver the lecture on Gestalt group process I wanted to give five years ago to this questioning client.

In retrospect, it seems wise that I chose to repress that lecture. At that time, I was struggling to integrate what I had learned about group from colleagues at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland and from staff persons I had worked with at the National Training Laboratories. I was assimilating the powerful experiences in groups and community that had occurred for me as a participant of the Arica Training Institute in San Francisco. When I returned to Cleveland from the West Coast, I intentionally changed my style of leadership from being a Gestalt "therapist" to being a teacher of process on an intrapersonal, interpersonal group level. I had not abandoned individual work in a group, but expanding awareness of "what is" to include these other dimensions. Having been socialised as a professional in a variety of types of groups I was trying to integrate what appeared to be a number of differences, conflicts and polarities in relation to individuals and systems. The more familiar I became with each polarity, the more I began to realise that I did not have to make an either or choice. Having struggled with these dilemmas for several years, I now believe that I have come to what is a serviceable integration of these polarities for me, which I trust will be of some service to colleagues who are concerned with some of these same issues.

This model is based on two assumptions: first, that the development of the creative potential in individuals is dependent on and related to a well functioning and healthy social system; and second, that groups, individuals, go through stages of development in the process of change that can be roughly characterised behaviourally as a move from dependence through counterdependence to independence. This model then requires a change in leader role and activity over time. It differs substantially from the popular notion of Gestalt groups, namely, that of individual therapy done in a group setting, as practised by Fritz Perls and others in their workshops, and so widely communicated through films and video-tapes. Paradoxically, it builds on what Fritz articulated in the theory of Gestalt but did not practice, for reasons which I shall go into later.

What is not generally understood is that both Gestalt therapy and group dynamics developed from common roots in psychology and philosophy. So before describing the way in which this integrated group process model works, I want to fill in some of this important historical background.

Essentially, the concept of contact and contact boundaries, so central in Gestalt theory, is a statement about the individual organism in an environmental field, and the interaction of each with the other. Laura Perls (1976, p. 223) describes contact as a boundary phenomenon between organism and environment: "It is the other acknowledgment of, and the coping with the other, the not-me, the different, the strange."

In Gestalt theory we also consider the individual and the environment as a unified field or system, in which all parts are interdependent, so as a unified field or system, in which all parts are interdependent, so that a change in one part of the total affects all other parts, This relation between the individual and the environment is succinctly stated by 'Fritz Perls (1973, p. 16) when he speaks of the contact boundary:

> *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, which includes both him and his environment. The nature of the relationship between him and his environment determines the human being's behaviour. With this new outlook, the environment and the organism stand in a relationship of mutuality to one another.*

This quotation, or a similar one, could as easily have been taken from the writings of Kurt Lewin, the seminal thinker in the field of group dynamics. This is not surprising, considering that both of these men derived their models of personal and social change from two sources: the work of the German psychologists, Koffka, Kîhler and Wertheimer (whose experimental studies in perception and learning became the foundation of Gestalt Psychology); and the contribution of a German researcher and physician, Kurt Goldstein) who extended the principles to the study of the whole person. While each of these men, Lewin and Perls, were dedicated to changing behaviour, they developed their ideas into what may appear to be very different and seemingly polarised fields of application; individuals and systems. Lewin was a social psychologist, and although he did not lose sight of the individual, what became "figural" for him was the social environment. The major goal for him was social change. His work as a scholar and research scientist provided the theoretical foundations of the field of applied behavioural science, which includes what is now known as group dynamics, organisational development and large systems change.

Perls was a physician and psychotherapist. For him, the individual was "figural" and individual change the major goal of his method. Perls, like Lewin, saw the individual from a systems perspective, but he focused in

on the phenomenology of the intrapersonal system. Indeed, the major goal in Gestalt therapy is to "heal the splits" within, the personal sub systems; mind, body and soul, and integration is defined as all parts being unified and available for contact with the environment.

Given the fact that Lewin and Perls focused on different aspects of the total person-environment configuration, it is no wonder that the followers of each have tended to ignore or neglect the work of the other. Although Gestalt therapy and group dynamics developed simultaneously in the United States, they ran parallel rather than intersecting courses. Perls acknowledged the contribution of Lewin to Gestalt psychology, but remained an individualist and an individual therapist throughout his career. He never claimed to be doing group therapy. In a talk delivered to the American Psychological Association in September, 1966, he spelled out the ways in which he differed from group therapists and encounter group leaders:

> *In contrast to the usual type of group meeting, I carry the load (the session, by either doing individual therapy or conducting mass experiments. I often interfere if the group plays opinion and interpretation games or has similar purely verbal encounters. In the Gestalt workshop, anyone who feels the urge can work with me. I am available, but never pushing. A dyad is temporarily developed between myself and the patient; but the rest of the group is fully involved, though seldom as active participants. Mostly they act as an audience which is stimulated to do quite a bit of silent self-therapy (Perls, 1967, p. 309).*

However, although Perls expressed his preference for individual therapy in a group setting, in that same paper he said that he considered individual therapy to be out of date, and that it should be replaced by group workshops. Through his many years of experience he had discovered the power of a group in the process of individual change, but he did not, or could not, exploit this learning. For Perls, the participants in a workshop were a collection of individuals. He used them as an audience, regarding them as an important presence or social environment that could be used in the service of the needs of the individual; the participants were discouraged from becoming a group.

This particular model of one-to-one therapy had another raison d'etre, beyond that of personal preference. The original and explicitly understood goal of Gestalt workshops in the 1950s and early '60s was to train mental health professionals in the theory and methods of Gestalt as it applied to individual therapy. Fritz and Laura Perls invented this strategy of experiential learning, believing that a method which stressed the phenomenology of the "here and now" needed to be experienced in the here-and-now. This turned out to be a very creative strategy for communicating and teaching Gestalt as a new theory and method of practice, especially in view of the professional scene that Laura and Fritz Perls stepped into when they arrived in New York City in 1947 to establish their practice.

At that time, the psychoanalytic approach was firmly entrenched in the mental health training institutions, supported by a vast literature and a host of journals and professional societies devoted exclusively to the analytic approach. By contrast, only two books in Gestalt therapy had been published by 1952, when the New York Gestalt Institute was established: Ego, Hunger and Aggression by F. Perls (1947) and Gestalt Therapy by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951). The workshop method, developed by the Perls and later used by, among others, Isador From, Paul Goodman, and Paul Weisz, proved to be a dramatic and effective teaching model and a powerful way of recruiting mental health professionals for training. It was an appropriate model for the needs and learning goals of the trainees. At that time, the participants in these workshops were either practising therapists or advanced graduate students in one of the mental health disciplines. Many of them had some previous experience as a client in therapy. Most of them knew a good deal about psychotherapeutic theories and clinical practice, but little about what to do with a living client. Gestalt therapy, with its emphasis on what to do and how to do it, provided some sorely needed tools, and the workshop setting made it possible to see and experience the effects of the methods.

Given this history, we can view group dynamics and Gestalt therapy as two species from the same lineage. From the phenotypes, or superficial characteristics, they do not seem to belong to the same category. They do not look alike; they dress differently talk differently, and often do not think alike. Nevertheless, they have the potential for mating with each other, and creating a new breed, a new synthesis.

The Emerging Gestalt

This new form, Gestalt group process, was evolved by the teaching faculty of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. It represents an integration of the experiences of that community as well as the conceptualisations of a number of individuals in that community.* I will be reporting about my view and particular integration, but it is essential to acknowledge the joint creation of these formulations.

> ** We have had a community process at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland which makes it difficult to*

ascribe a formulation to any one individual. Since we began offering workshops and training programs to the public in 1958, the majority of programs have been planned, designed and led by staff teams in varying combinations. Because of this there has been a continuous and reciprocal faculty learning process, so that the formulations and practices of any one person tend to be that person's unique synthesis rather than that person's unique contribution. However, there are several persons whose inputs and perspectives on group dynamics and system processes have been highly important and influential. They are Edwin Nevis, Carolyn Hirsch Lukesmeier, Leonard Hirsch, and Richard Wallen (deceased).

Since 1958, when the faculty of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland began offering Gestalt groups to the general public, three distinct forms of group processes have been used: the individually-orientated psychotherapeutic model; the personal growth model, sometimes described as "therapy for normals"; and the group-process-oriented model, which I shall describe in greater detail in this chapter. These models have some things in common: namely, the theoretical perspectives of Gestalt therapy, as well as certain methods and techniques that have emerged from the practice of Gestalt therapy. However, the goals or tasks of each of these groups are substantially different, and the leader interventions are directed to different levels of phenomenological process in each case.

A schema has been developed that can be useful in understanding the differences between these three types of groups. David Singer et al. (1975) have characterised small groups in terms of two basic parameters: (a) the major goal or task of the group; and (b) the psychological levels involved in the task. Group tasks are placed on a continuum that has learning (in the sense of cognitive/perceptual change) at one end and psychological change (in the sense of altered coping capacity, personality structure, or response repertoire) at the other end. In between is the region of dual task systems, with co-equal learning and change tasks located at the midpoint. By "levels," these authors are referring to the three kinds of processes that are occurring simultaneously in every group: intrapersonal process, interpersonal processes, and group processes.

The original teaching members of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland were trained by the faculty of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy; Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, Isador From, Paul Goodman and Paul Weisz. In terms of Singer et al.'s schema, all of our teachers operated from the model of the individually-oriented psychotherapeutic group. Psychological change was the major task or purpose of this group experience, and the leader interventions were primarily on the intrapersonal level of functioning. For the most part, interpersonal transactions were limited to those that occurred between the leader and a group member. This was the model which we naturally followed as we began to lead our own groups in Cleveland. However, over time, we began to realise that this type of group process was not appropriate for the needs or characteristics of the people who were coming to our workshops. For one thing, a number of group members found this intensive intrapersonal experience a stressful one that required more than a weekend to assimilate and integrate. Furthermore, most of our participants wanted something other than being cured of their neuroses; they wanted to learn something about themselves and about the Gestalt perspective, philosophy and values. Many of them did not want to become therapists; they wanted to find some better ways of relating to themselves and to each other, and perhaps to see whether Gestalt could be meaningfully applied to their "outside" lives as teachers, businessmen, family members, etc.

Gradually, the staff began to shift to a personal growth model, and to design these experiences with dual and co-equal learning and change tasks. In other words, we added the task of understanding Gestalt on a perceptual/cognitive level to the task of personal change. The major focus of the learning remained on the intrapersonal level of awareness, but the leaders stimulated and used the interpersonal reactions among the group members to facilitate the dual learning and change tasks. Our roles as leaders became more varied and complex. We became teachers and significant others to the group members as well as therapists. We gave short lectures on Gestalt theory and the process of change. We modelled what we were teaching by sharing our feelings and perceptions in the here-and-now; we used a variety of exercises so that all members of the group would have some common experiences from which to learn about their intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning.

The thrust to develop an expanded model that would include members' learning about group processes came about because some of us experienced dissonance between our values and what people actually received reinforcement for during a personal growth group. As a faculty we had moved away from the individually-oriented psychotherapeutic model, partly to avoid some of the paradoxes and imbalances of this type of group process, which, among other things, reinforces the "cult of the individual" and creates a leader dependent relationship between members and leaders.*

* As Yalom (1970, p. 450) pointed out with reference to the leadership style of Fritz Perls: "... Perls

was so acutely aware of the necessity for each individual to assume responsibility for himself and his therapy. Much of Perls' modius operandi was, in fact. explicitly directed toward that end. Yet, beneath the technique, beneath the imperative to assume responsibility, the Gestalt therapist creates a bewildering paradox: on the one hand, he exhorts the patient to be, to act for himself, while, on the other hand, he says, through his leadership style: 'I will take charge, I will lead you. Depend on me to provide energy and ingenious techniques.' "

However, while the personal growth group model does facilitate learnings about oneself in relation to others, and about the necessity of transcending the self-boundaries in order to enter into and maintain interpersonal relationships, the leader still maintains a central role throughout the group process, and the members tend to come away from these experiences with the belief that it is sufficient to express oneself and be responsible for oneself in order to create a better personal life, or family, or work team, or community. This belief is not only naive but dysfunctional, since it neglects the reality of the social environment in which we are all embedded. Given the persistent dilemmas and difficulties which we all face in becoming conscious human beings in this lifetime, and living as we do within the context of a new world order that is struggling to be born, it no longer seems sufficient to free the individual to become more differentiated and individuated without bringing in the polarities of being related and committed to that which transcends the self. Waiter Kempler (1974, pp. 64-65), a Gestalt family therapist, has written eloquently on this point:

Relatedness is often considered optional. It isn't. We are related. The question is not if, but how. The extremes of relatedness are separateness and unity. Separateness is a dimension of relatedness, not a disruption of it.... From the neighbourhood squabbles of children to the challenging task of diplomats at the United Nations, all endeavour is characterised by the endlessly undulating desire for separateness and unity.... Although the best preparation for unity is the successful separation, it is not enough for the therapist to stop work at this point. Neither separateness nor union is the goal of the therapeutic process, but rather the exhortation of the endless and often painful undulation between them.

Gestalt group process, then, is an attempt to create conditions or learning about what it means to be a member of a group (whether that group be a personal growth group, a work team, a family, or a community), so that the polarities and dilemmas of separateness and unity can be experienced in the context of personal growth.

Part II. Gestalt Group Process

In a Gestalt group-process-oriented experience, the leader is committed to working with both the individual and the group for the enhancement of both. This stance is not unique. It has been developed and described by a number of theoretically diverse practitioners, including Bion (1961, the originator of the Tavistock model in England, Berne (1966), in his early work on group transactional analysis, Whitaker and Lieberman (1964), Yalom (1970) and Astrachan (1970). What I am presenting is an integration of this group-as-a-system perspective with Gestalt group practice.

In some sense, a Gestalt therapist always works from a systems perspective (whether the client is an individual, a family or a group) and considers therapy as a process that take place within the boundaries of a social system. Like all social systems, the therapeutic system consists of people, a common task and a method for accomplishing this task. In Gestalt therapy terms, personal growth can be described as a boundary phenomenon, the result of contact between self and environment. The therapist functions as teacher of phenomenological process, and assists the client to identify how and in what ways awareness and energy are being blocked and excitement and contact with the environment are being avoided. The therapist provides the client with some learning tools, namely Gestalt methods and techniques, and establishes a particular kind of learning environment not only by the way she/he uses these tools, but also by and through the emotional relationship that is established with the client.

Within the boundaries of that social system, phenomenological processes are occurring simultaneously on all three system levels: the intrapersonal level, the interpersonal level and the systems level. What I mean by systems level process are the dynamic patterns of interaction that develop among people over time and create a way of being together. These system processes create a social milieu which affects the way people in that system feel about themselves and each other, as well as the way they behave in that environment. These system processes account for the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. Some examples of system processes are the beliefs and assumptions that people hold, the way they go about accomplishing their tasks and making decisions, the roles they play, and the informal and formal rules and norms that operate in the relationship.

Given the nature of the contract in individual therapy, which is to help the client change personally, most of the therapist's interventions direct the client's attention to processes that are occurring on the intrapersonal or interpersonal level of awareness. The output, that is, what gets learned by the client, is a great deal about what goes on inside the boundary of her/his skin, often a considerable amount about what takes place in the process of making interpersonal contact, but not much about what occurs on the dyadic or system level. This is understandable, since the therapist is a part of the system, and this makes it difficult for the therapist to be an objective observer of the system processes. Furthermore, the therapist's role as a teacher and guide through the labyrinths of individual phenomenological processes necessitates certain priorities. In working with individuals, the major questions for the therapist are: "How can I tap the resources available to me so that I will expand the learning potentials of this client?" and "How can I create a relationship that will promote optimal conditions for learning for this client?"

Let us now shift to the group situation. In groups, there are many clients present, and the interactional possibilities increase exponentially, particularly if conditions are such that the members can interact with each other as well as with the therapist. The therapist now has the opportunity of being a manager of a learning process, one in which the critical questions become: "How can I create the conditions that will enable these people to tap into each other as resources here?" "How can I help them create the kind of relationships that will provide the richest learning environment for all?" and "How can I help them develop awareness of the polarities and choices between taking care of individuals and taking care of the group?"

In terms of the schema of Singer et al. previously discussed, the Gestalt group process leader adds the learning task of awareness of group processes to the task of intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness. This new task requires a change in the role and skills of the leader. The leader who relates to the group-as-a-system as well as to the intrapersonal and the interpersonal processes going on is like a juggler who has a variety of balls, each of a different size and shape, that must be kept moving and balanced. The leader has three types of role choices available that determine the level at which the intervention will take place. She/he can function as a therapist for an individual, as a facilitator of interpersonal processes or as a consultant to the group-as-a-system. Obviously, the leader can intervene on only one level at a time, and her/his implicit or explicit priorities determine which level of learning will be pursued at the expense of the others.

To illustrate, let us consider the following example:

> *This is the second meeting of a personal growth group in which all the members are also involved in an intensive, month-long residential Gestalt training program. This group consists of six female members and four males.*
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> *One of the women begins the session by saying, "Wow! This is going to be fun, there are so many strong women here!" Sam replies, "Your statement makes me feel angry. I feel excluded here just because I'm a man."*
>
> *Another woman, Alice, seated across the room from him, says in a trembling voice, "I want to exclude you. I want to exclude all men from my life now." When Sam asks her, "But why me?" Alice goes into a long list of complaints about his behaviour with her (or, more accurately, about the meaning she is making out of what he said to her and how he has behaved with her in their encounters both in and outside the group). She ends her tirade with, "I'm angry with you because you are not being forceful enough with me, and I end up doing all the work of relationship building, and I'm god damned sick and tired of doing that!"*
>
> *As Alice finishes, a third woman bursts out, "And I'm angry now because you and some of the other women here are making demands that men be a particular way here and I don't like that."*

This short sequence can be viewed and responded to on any one of the three system levels. If the therapist decides to intervene on the intrapersonal level, Alice would work on her anger toward men in general and, perhaps toward Sam in particular. If the intervention is directed to the interpersonal level, both parties would be encouraged to explore their perceptions of one another, their communication patterns, and their differences. At the group level, the leader would call attention to this interactional sequence as one in which the members are talking about criteria for acceptance to membership in this group. Each of these interventions gives a different message about the major learning task of the group and about what types of interactions will be attended to and made a priority in this experience.

Given the multiple group learning tasks and the multiple leader roles which become operationalised through the choice of level of intervention, what are some guidelines that can help the leader in making these choices? What I have found useful is a framework that conceptualises the group in terms of stages of development. This framework is based on that developed by Schutz (1966) to understand the behaviour of

individuals in groups and the dynamics of group process. He suggests that there are three categories of needs people bring into groups, and these needs, while interrelated, tend to emerge in a hierarchical order: the need to affiliate or to belong; the need for autonomy; and the need for affection. On an emotional level, these needs are experienced as issues around identity, power and innocence, and intimacy. Certain types of behaviours are associated with each of these needs and emotional issues: The need to affiliate and belong and to establish one's identity produces dependent behaviour; the need for autonomy mobilises the individual to test out the limits of authority and control, and produces counterdependent behaviour; the need for affection and intimacy motivates people to relate effectively with one another and to behave interdependently. These basic needs, emotional issues and behaviours appear over and over again in the life of any group, but in looking at the development of the group over time, they tend to occur in sequence and can be used to characterise the stages of group development.

I will now discuss each of these stages more fully and the implications of these stages for the leader role.

Stage One: Identity and Dependence

The identity of each member of the group is dependent, to some degree, on the way in which she/he is perceived and responded to by every other member of the group, including the leader. On some level of awareness, each individual coming into a group has three sets of questions. The first set are questions about me and my identity here:

"How should I present myself here?"

"What do I want and what do I have to do to get it?"

"Can I be who I am here and belong to this group?"

"What's safe to express or disclose about myself here?"

"Will I be seen as the unique and special person I am?"

"Will I be so different that I will feel alone?"

Another set of questions relate to the identity of the others present:

"Is there anyone else here like me?"

"Will I get understanding or support from anyone here?"

"How are they going to feel about me and what are they going to think about me?"

The third set of questions relates to the leader and the process:

"What are we going to be doing here?"

"What are the rules or expectations here?"

"What are they going to find out about me, and what am I going to find out about myself that I don't know or don't want others to know about me?"

"How will I be treated, judged? rejected? bullied? or accepted and cared for?"

During this phase, the primary task of the leader is to set up relationships with the members and among the members as quickly as possible and to get some data generated around the three sets of questions the members are silently asking. Some of the activities that facilitate this task are:

1) Contracting and setting boundaries. This includes letting the members know what the tasks of the group are as she/he understands them, and defining the leader role in relation to these tasks. I, and/or I and my co-leader, usually begin a group by making some statements about our ideas and values about personal growth and describing our role in the group, which is as facilitators of awareness on the intrapersonal, interpersonal and group process level. Given the issues of identity that are in the foreground, we structure some process through which the members can share relevant information about themselves on the interpersonal level. There are several ways to do this: One way is to break them into sub groups and give them some information-sharing task; another is to use some group exercise. A third choice is to go through the somewhat tedious process of having each person introduce her/himself in some way to the total group. At this phase, the leader is invested with so much power that everything she/he does and says is much more important and impactful than what anyone else in the group says and does. The dilemma for the leader at this point is: "How much or how little do I do, and when? My experience has shown me that when I structure some lively activity for the group, this introductory phase goes faster and is more interesting; the

price we pay is that the members become more dependent on the leader to draw something out of a bag of tricks to keep the process going, rather than reaching into themselves or into each other for energy. My present preference is to go with the tedium rather than the excitement during this early phase, so that the members begin to rely on themselves and each other, rather than on the leader(s).

2) Encouraging interpersonal contact. This is a means of exploring the interpersonal environment and of discovering resources present in the group. I can do this very simply by noticing when eye contact or verbal statements are directed at me, and by suggesting that people look around and find someone else in the group to whom they can make these comments. This is not to say that I do not respond or interact with individuals at all, but only that I choose when and for how long I respond, since what I do as a leader begins to establish some rules and norms in the group.

3) Giving some messages about the approach we will be using. As leader, I do this through verbal and nonverbal modelling. For example, I share my own internal process, the feelings I am having, the observations I am making and the inferences I am drawing from these data. If I am attentive and listen rather than jumping in with "therapeutic" interventions, I am giving the message that we are making space here to be what we are.

4) Legitimising work on all systems levels. At this stage, group members are most concerned about determining how safe it is going to be for them in this group and what is acceptable to bring up. I want to legitimise individual work on the intrapersonal level, but not until a number of people have shared their feelings. At this stage, rather than intervening on an interpersonal level, I work on the assumption that each person is a spokesperson for others and is verbalising what may be an important issue or theme for some, if not all, of the members of the group. I inquire whether anyone else can relate to the issue this particular person is sharing. In this way, the individual issue is seen and treated as a more universal theme and an issue of the system as a whole.

To summarise, the leader activities in this first phase are directed toward providing a climate of trust that will support some risk-taking, and toward making some connections with individuals' inner experience, among individuals, and with the group-as-a-whole. Usually the way people make contact with each other during this first phase is through the discovery of commonalities and similarities. This leads to a norm of politeness and oversolicitousness, the energy in the group falls off, and this signals that the work of differentiation must begin.

Stage Two: Influence and Counterdependence

The major issues the individuals and the group must grapple with in this stage are those of influence, authority and control. At this stage, each member of the group is aware that she/he is being influenced by what is happening in the group and that certain implicit or explicit norms are operating which make it difficult to behave differently from what appears to be acceptable. Norms, of course, are ways of describing what is permissible or valued in a group, or what is not acceptable and devalued. Norms are inferred from behaviour and reflect the assumptions people make about themselves, one another, and how things "ought to be."

Members may begin to challenge whatever norms are operating by interrupting, by expressing negative reactions to each other or to what is happening, or by directly taking on the leader and questioning her/his authority and competence. The priority tasks for the leader in this phase is to work for increasing differentiation, divergence and role flexibility among members. Leader activities that facilitate this task are as follows:

1) Heightening awareness of the norms that are operating in the group. Since norms are based on untested assumptions members are making about what is or is not acceptable, the leader can heighten awareness of norms by turning the assumptions people are making into questions. For example, the leader can observe that there seems to be a norm operating that it is not OK to differ or disagree in this group, and asks, "Is it OK to differ or be disagreeable here?" In this way, group members learn to identify the norms that are operating, as well as their consequences, and make decisions to change them by monitoring their own behaviour.

2) Encouraging challenge and open expression of difference and dissatisfaction. Whatever is happening or not happening in a group, the conflicts occurring on a personal, interpersonal and group level must be allowed to become explicit. Dealing with divergence at any level generates strong emotional reactions and is experienced as very risky for the individual and for the integrity of the group. How much conflict an individual can tolerate is a function of that person and the situation she/he is in. How much divergence a group can tolerate and still operate as a system is a function of the cohesiveness of that

group. At this stage the leader is faced with some critical choices around the level of intervention: "Do I pay attention to the person who is obviously in pain because the conflicts in the group have triggered off an old piece of unfinished business?" or "Do I consult with the group about the way it is working and dealing with conflict and difference?" Here, as elsewhere, I am not proposing any answers, only posing the dilemmas that arise around level of intervention.

3) Differentiating roles from persons. In a group, members often play out roles that are a function of the needs of a group rather than simply a function of the personality or character of that person. A group, like an individual, requires that certain functions be performed to enable it to go through the cycle of experience of awareness, energy, contact, and withdrawal or completion. Depending on how people behave in the early stages of a group, one person is more likely to carry, or be identified with, one of these functions. For example, the person who initially provides the energy to get things moving in a group gets "assigned" to this role, and the other members, and perhaps the leader, rely on, or provoke, this person to energise them. Some people carry the awareness function because they are particularly good observers and reporters of their own experience, or of what they see, hear, or sense going on in others. Some people who are outgoing and caring tend to carry the contact or caretaker function; those who are assertive or more spontaneous provide the impulsivity and creativity in the group. All of these functions are positive ones and help the group to accomplish its work. However, when these functions are identified with one person rather than being seen as functions which everyone has the capacity of expressing, everyone's behaviour becomes stereotyped. Once roles become somewhat fixed, group members are likely to resist the attempts of any one person to deviate from the assigned position, since a change in any one person in a system affects the functioning of everyone else in that system.

The leader can bring this role-taking behaviour into awareness by commenting on the stereotypes when she/he sees them operating and thereby helping the group to recognise the consequences of this for the group as a system and for the individual members.

Often the roles which get played out in a group are projections of the disowned part of the other members' personality. Scapegoating is an example of this. When any one person in a group carries the role of "victim," the leader can make a group level intervention to get the members to consider what is being avoided by having someone in the group act out that part of themselves.

Stage Three: Intimacy and Interdependence

This is the stage at which real contact occurs within and among members of a group, as contrasted with the pseudo-intimacy which develops in the first stage when group members are discovering that they all belong to the human race and are feeling warm and cosy with one another. Real contact requires the experience of being nose-to-nose against that which is different and other than the self. Real intimacy, which I define as those relationships which nurture and sustain us over time and through separation, usually need to be forged in the crucible of divergence and conflict. Fighting often precedes real loving, and so it is in groups. Working through the issues of influence, power and authority that characterise the second phase and living through this experience provide the support for taking high risks on an intrapersonal and interpersonal level.

At this stage, members behave interdependently in the sense that they can depend on each other for understanding, support and challenge; also the relationships are reciprocal. Members are significant to each other, and the group as a system becomes a significant other, providing the nourishment and the resources for growth. The leader is no longer regarded as the ultimate authority, but as an experienced resource. If the leader has focused previously on the group level interventions, the members learn to monitor and maintain their own functioning as a system. They serve as resources to each other, asking for and accepting help from the leader when her/his skills or perspective are required.

When a group is functioning at this level, the processing goes at a quick pace, the energy level is synergistic and mellow rather than frantic, and the level of self-disclosure very high. Even when the issues being dealt with are those of loss, separation, grief and remorse, the group can accept, support and absorb some of the terror and pain.

It takes being together for a long time for a group to be able to sustain functioning at this third stage, and my experience has been that a group's capacity to maintain themselves at this stage requires at least a year or two years. Groups that meet for a shorter time sometimes reach this stage, but only temporarily. Therefore, the remarks I am making about the functions of a leader at this stage primarily apply to groups that have a long history so that members can depend on each other and on the way their system as a whole functions over time.

The functions of the leader at this stage are as follows:

1) Maintain a consultant role to the group, and stay out of the way. Interventions that are required from the leader at this stage are few and far between.

2) Help the group to arrive at some closure. Groups, whatever their duration, are temporary systems, and must go through a closure process that includes a re-entry into the "real" world. Members must say "goodbye" to those with whom they have shared this group experience, and plan for the transfer and support of these learnings to their lives outside of the group. This usually requires some simple structures that focus members on these issues. In a weekend group I can ask them to share the most important learning for them from this experience and to think about ways in which they can support this process for themselves when they return home. In groups of longer duration, for example, training groups, this planning becomes the closure experience.

3) Acknowledge the unfinished business that could not be dealt with in this group. Given the cyclical nature of these stages of development, all groups do not end when the group is at the stage of intimacy and interdependence. In this case, the closure process needs to acknowledge the negative as well as the positive aspects of the experience, the needs that did not get satisfied and the expectation that were not fulfilled. Some assessment must be made about the discrepancy between what was hoped for and what actually happened. It is from this assessment process that the polarities and dilemmas of change are learned.

I would like to think that all of the groups I lead go into the closure phase from the intimacy-interdependence stage, but I would be lying if I claimed that to be the case. The fact is that I have learned the most meaningful lessons when the closure is not one of full satisfaction for all. If nothing else, I rediscover the virtue of humility and the awesomeness, complexity and mystery of individuals and systems.

Epilogue

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

This statement is not only the foundation of Gestalt psychology and Gestalt therapy, but also the essence of all systems of thought which attempt to make meaning out of the apparent distinctions, contradictions and discontinuities in the natural and human universe. To describe a process that is based on this holistic perspective, as I have been doing in this paper, is a contradiction. A group is more than the sum of its parts, and Gestalt group process is more than the sum of the principles and elements which I have reviewed. However, as E. F. Schumacher (1977, p. 87) has said:

> *One way of looking at the world as a whole is by means of a map, that is to say, some sort of plan or outline that shows where various things are to be found, not all things, of course, for that would make the map as big as the world, but the things that are most important for orientation: outstanding landmarks, as it were, which you cannot miss or which, if you do miss them, leave you in total perplexity.*

What I have done in this paper is to sketch out a map of the territory. Anyone who has travelled knows that a map is not the territory: It is a two dimensional abstraction of a three-dimensional reality.

Obviously, how useful you, the reader, find this map will depend an your goal as therapist or group leader, or what you regard as the primary mission of psychotherapy and personal growth. The mission, as I see it is to raise consciousness, and that is different from the aims usually associated with psychotherapy. The overriding aim of therapy as I see it is not simply to cure people (whatever "cure" may mean), nor is it to teach clients how to become more adept at manipulating the environment rather than themselves. Nor is the goal to enable each individual to develop a more differentiated and integrated self. It may be all of the above but the essential aim is to assist in the evolution of a self which can ultimately transcend the self. This means that at the core of personal development there is this central polarity: freedom and liberation on the one hand, and discipline and social responsibility on the other. It is the tension between these opposites which permeates everything we do.

This basic paradox was succinctly captured almost one thousand years ago by the Jewish sage, Rabbi Hillel, when he asked:

> *If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*

> *If I am for myself only, what am I?*

> *If not now, when?*