

Reflections on Field Theory

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FIELD THEORY

Holism, Context, and the “Total Situation”

The maps of field theory depict well the territory of human beings in their contexts, i.e., of people in relationship, in community. The essence of field theory is that a holistic perspective towards the person extends to include the environment, the social world, organisations, and culture. The more assiduously we can navigate with the various field theory maps, the more we are likely to actually perceive and recognise the indivisibility of people from their surroundings and life situations.

“Field theory can hardly be called a theory in the usual sense” (Lewin 1952, p.45). Rather it is a set of principles, an outlook, a method and a whole way of thinking which relates to the intimate inter-connectedness between events and the settings or situations in which these events take place. So remember that theory in this case has a broad meaning, denoting a general theoretical outlook or way of appreciating reality.

The idea of ‘the field’ comes from that of the electrical or magnetic field, itself originally a metaphor. What happens to something placed in this force field is a function of the overall properties of the field taken as an interactive dynamic whole. The field as a whole is also changed as a result of inclusion of something new.

The early Gestalt psychologists latched on to this physical science metaphor, concerned as they were both with the phenomenology of perception and also with attempting to be scientifically respectable in an age where there was intense academic pressure to be so. They developed the electrical field metaphor to account, for instance, for their ‘Law of Pragnanz’: this refers to the experience, when viewing something which is apparently random and meaningless (e.g. blotches of colour), of it’s suddenly transforming into meaningful, recognisable form e.g. picture of a face. The slotting into place effect came to be explained as a correction of disequilibrium in the perceptual field: “a grouping of certain forces operates upon a given form and only ceases to transform when the form has become stable,” (Hartmen, 1935, p.48). Or to put it another way, when the gestalt is completed, i.e. as a well formed, strong gestalt, the field comes into equilibrium.

While field theory is discussed in the writing of the early Gestalt psychologists, notably Kohler (1969), its foremost exponent was Kurt Lewin, a German Jewish academic refugee in North America: whose contribution to psychology is said to rival Freud’s in its long-term impact on twentieth century psychology, (Marrow, 1969). Associated with his name is not only field theory but action research, group dynamics and sensitivity training. He is regarded as the founder of modern social psychology and a major influence on management training and organisational development, (Weisbord 1987).

A lot of people identify Lewin as a Gestalt psychologist, although like Goldstein – he never described himself as such, despite having worked as a young man with Wertheimer, Kohler and Koffka.

Lewin's thinking has been vastly under-appreciated in Gestalt Therapy. One of his most famous quotations is: "There is nothing so practical as a good theory", which I believe is what field theory is: once understood, provides a very adequate conceptual language for all Gestalt practice.

The hallmark of field theory, in Lewin's words, is "looking at the total situation" (Lewin 1952 p. 288), rather than piecemeal, or item by item, or variable by variable analysis. Instead of reducing complex interactive phenomena to separate component parts, the overall picture or total situation is appreciated as a whole, with its whole-istic aspects recognised as such. There is a willingness to address and investigate the organised, interconnected, interdependent, interactive nature of complex human phenomena.

Obviously field theory is not the only theory or perspective with that kind of message. During the same period – the 1930's and 40's, in which Lewin was developing his ideas, general systems theory was also evolving (von Bertalanffy, 1968). This has grown into a formidable atlas of its own, with many well known applications – for instance to family therapy and in organisations. I intend to bypass the complex and at times obscure arguments which have taken place in *The Gestalt Journal* (see Altner, 1983 and ensuing issues) as to whether field theory and systems theory are comparable theoretically, and whether both can be equally valid within Gestalt therapy. The fact is that both approaches provide useful means of depicting complex phenomena holistically – that is, not treating them in isolation but in their contexts, situations, environments. Whichever approach is followed, what is sure is that an outlook of this kind is essential to the theory and practice of Gestalt Therapy.

However, as between any two sets of maps, there are differences in emphasis and in details, as a Gestalt practitioner my own preference is for the field theory map rather than one based on system theory, not least because the latter one has been more widely over-simplified and mis-applied, and historically speaking represents a later importation into Gestalt theory and practice.

Five Principles of Field Theory

I intend today to recast field theory in the form of five principles or propositions which characterise this general way of perceiving and thinking about context, holism and process, and which lie at the very centre of our outlook as work as Gestalt Therapists.

Before beginning I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness not only to Lewin and also Kohler, but also to Gregory Bateson (1979), and in the contemporary Gestalt world to Gary Yontef (1984) and Carl Hodges (1990), both of whom have helped me grasp the field theory outlook more fully. They are, of course, absolved from any inadequacies in the present account.

The five principles are as follows-

1. The Principle of Organisation
2. The Principle of Contemporaneity
3. The Principle of Singularity
4. The Principle Changing Process
5. The Principle of Changing Process

1. The Principle of Organisation

Meaning derives from looking at the total situation, the totality of co-existing facts. Lewin writes:

Whether or not a certain type of behaviour occurs depends not on the presence or absence of one fact or a number of facts as viewed in isolation, but upon the constellation (the structure of forces) of the specific field as a whole. The 'meaning' of the single fact depends upon its position in the field (Lewin, 1952 p. 150).

Everything is interconnected and the meaning derives from the total situation.

If, as I speak, a bomb exploded two or three hundred yards from this lecture room, there would be a major perturbation of the field. You would stop sitting here and I would stop lecturing. We would completely reorganise. Everything within this new framework would acquire a new meaning. This room might be reorganised into a temporary hospital, or a command centre for the emergency services, or a morgue. Properties of things are ultimately defined by their context of use. We might find that we have to put chairs together to make temporary "beds" for injured people, tables might become stretchers. Meaning derives from their context of use in the "constellation ...of the specific field as a whole" (Lewin, 1952, p.150). In other words, rather than thinking in terms of the enduring properties of objects which are held to be constant, their characteristics are defined by a wider organisation of overall meaning, which "emphasises independence" (ibid. p. 149).

Of course, for most of the time, the field as presently structured remains invariant: the lecture room retains its everyday functions as a lecture room, complete with usual expectations of how it will be used, of furniture, and of space. Fields, therefore, differ along a continuum of whether their organisation is familiar or novel. On the one hand, functions may be embedded in bricks and mortar and architectural assumptions, on the other, structure can be newly thrown up, improvised for a present and transient purpose. Either way 'structure' and 'function' are not rigidly separated but are both attempts to convey qualities of the interrelated whole.

Let me say a word about randomness. As Gestalt Therapists we know that much of what may appear random or inconsequential is in fact organised; that is, it is meaningful in some context of which we may be partially or completely unaware. If we notice a person scratching his or her knee, or tapping a little finger, or momentarily hesitating, we may draw attention to these apparently trivial and transient phenomena. We do so because we know from our experience that they are, more often than not, far from trivial: on further exploration they are found to be part of some greater schema, perhaps an unfinished situation in which impulses have been retroflected. The meaning of the small event is revealed as the wider context or total situation becomes clear. Behaviour and phenomenal experience which are seen as part of the total field, or have been contextualised, are found to be organised, to have meaning.

2. *The Principle of Contemporaneity*

This Principle points to the fact that it is the constellation of influences in the *present* field which ‘explains’ present behaviour. No particular special causal status is accorded to events in the past which, in many systems, are thought of as ‘determinants’ of what is happening now. Likewise, future events, planned or fantasised, are not attributed special status as ‘goals’ or ‘incentives’ of what is seen to be occurring in the present.

Lewin points out that “the character of the situation at a given time” may include the *past-as-remembered-now* or the *future-as-anticipated-now*, which will form part of the person’s experiential field in the present. Thus:

The individual sees not only his present situation, he has certain expectations, wishes, fears, daydreams for his future (ibid. p.53).

As well, and such notions, along with his concepts of the past, continue part of his present reality:

The psychological past and the psychological future are simultaneously part of the psychological field at any given time *t*. The time perspective is continually changing. According to field theory, any type of behaviour depends on the total field, including the time perspective at that time, but not in addition, upon any past or future field and *its* time perspectives. (Lewin, 1952 p.54, my italics.)

In short, it is not the *actual* events, past or future, which concern us because the actual field conditions at these other times are not present now.

We can notice here what a radically different conception of causality is implied from what is more general in our culture and in other varieties of psychotherapy. As Gestalt therapists, with our focus on present experience, we are not explaining phenomena by reference to past or future ‘causes’. Instead we concentrate on ‘what is’ rather than ‘what was’ or ‘what will be’, not because we wish to ignore a person’s history or her future intentions – say, her past sexual abuse or her plans to marry – but because our attention is directed, in the case of the abuse, how the abuse is being recollected or by-passed or made light or magnified now; and with her marriage plans, we are interested not so much in the plans themselves but in the whole way in which they form part of her present actuality or – using another term of Lewin’s – of her “life space”.

Taking this example further, we can see that in the therapy itself, what also forms part of the present field is the person and presence of her therapist. The recollecting or anticipating (of past abuse and the future marriage respectively) are, therefore, taking place in a present day human context where there will be a greater or lesser degree of trust in the therapist, a lot of or little support offered, and where the therapist may have clear or unclear boundaries. These contemporary circumstances inevitably are part of the present field, and will in turn affect the way the past or future are evoked – just as their present evocation in turn affects the total situation (perhaps the future course of therapy) as it subsequently evolves. Gestalt therapy, as a phenomenological approach, is thus looking at the actual present happenings within the therapy situation itself.

3. The Principle of Singularity

Each situation, and each situation-field, is unique. As much as many psychologists would like to pretend otherwise, so that human behaviour can be subsumed under normal science and generalised 'laws' applied to explain behaviour, our known, direct, personal experience is otherwise. Circumstances are never quite the same, and each of several persons inevitably had a different vantage point, even if they appear to be located in the same time and place. We are all in this lecture room together, but our actual phenomenal experiences are all different. As we have observed many times in groups, what stands out as interesting or relevant for different people is varied in the extreme, relating to their background, current need, pervading present concerns and long-term unfinished business. Similarly each person listening to (or reading) what I am saying will be making different connections, taking in certain things and ignoring or side-stepping others. Meanings will be individually constructed and conclusions drawn which are not identical.

Generalisations are therefore suspect. They imply an order and predictability which is often not sustained by attention to 'what is'. It is often frustrating for newcomers to gestalt therapy who want answers to such questions as "how do you work with anorexics in Gestalt?" when one painstakingly points out that there are no general procedures which derive from a fixed notion of anorexia, instead, the therapist will attend to the individual circumstances, the client's level of self-support, degree of awareness, time available, nature of resistances, urgency of present need, and ways the person interrupts contact, to mention a few of the many aspects of the total present situation which may influence what the therapist will attend to. The honouring of singularity of each set of circumstances and each person requires, therefore, both respectfulness and also a willingness to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. Generalisations – implying inherent similarity – and lead to premature or a *priori* structuring of reality perceived, which can easily lead in turn to finding in the present situation what one is looking for.

I am not implying that there are no continuities, similarities, and consistencies at all; nor that we would be sensible to avoid all the mass of theoretical generalisation which exists in psychotherapy. However, if attention is concentrated on these, as it so often is, in an attempt to explain or account for something in terms of a comfortable seeming, lawful, and general truth, the actuality of the present situation may not be appreciated in all its specificity. As Lewin reminds us, we are always dealing with a "multitude of coexistent interdependent facts" as well as "conditions which influence behaviour in one direction or the other" and we need an outlook and method which covers "the exceptional" as well as the "usual case", (ibid, pp.150-51).

4. The Principle of Changing Process

This principle refers to the field undergoing continuous change: “one never steps into the same river twice”. While the Principle of Singularity emphasised the need for unique perspectives for unique occurrences, the Principle of Changing Process refers to the fact that experiences are provisional rather than permanent. Nothing is fixed and static in an absolute way. Even with the same individual the field is newly constructed moment by moment – we cannot twice have an exactly identical experience. As William James (1905) pointed out: “It is obvious and palpable that our state of mind is never exactly the same”...When the identical fact recurs, we must think of it in a fresh manner, see it under a somewhat different angle, apprehend in different relations from those when it last appeared” (p.156).

“Timing is everything” is a therapeutic axiom in Gestalt work. We have all experienced occasions when a specific intervention made a particular point exactly ‘right’ (an aesthetic judgement), i.e., it is perceptive, appropriate, and useful for the client. Equally, we have all known times when interventions come a moment or two too late, when the experience of the individual or group has moved on and the intervention is, if anything, a distraction, or when an intervention is just a little premature, so the client is deprived of making his own connection.

Considering the longer time frame of an ongoing relationship, there is the same necessity to stay ‘up to date’. Reality unfolds in ways which can never be fully predicted, and what we thought was known, with certitude, may no longer apply. There is inherent and inevitable uncertainty as people adapt to new circumstances, accommodate to changes in their situation, and learn new ways to cope with ongoing problems.

Field theory is thus relativistic. If the field is in flux, if our perceptions of reality are continuously being recreated, and the stability of equilibrium of the field re-established moment by moment, there are obviously no absolute cut off points (e.g., “here perception ends and projection begins”) or fixed either/or dichotomies: (“either you are an assertive person or not”). Hard and fast distinctions come about as a result of conceptualising and classifying, from the nature of language, not from phenomenal experience itself.

Appropriately, Gestaltists are wary of categories that effectively become permanent labels, and descriptions which become fixed definitions of the situation. Thus, instead of dividing people, say into ‘retroreflectors’ and ‘non-retroreflectors’, we rather think of retroreflection as a process, and one in which we all engage at times, given certain circumstances. Even someone who retroreflects frequently does not always do so. As Lewin (1952 p.. 242) points out:

A given state of a person corresponds to a variety of behaviour and can be inferred only from a combined determination of overt behaviour and the situation.”

Let us, therefore, be wary of the tendency to systematise, make permanent, and fixate on categories and definitions. At the same time let us also be wary of creating a fixed gestalt of dichotomy in which we “never use diagnostic categories”.

5. *The Principle of Possible Relevance*

This principle asserts that no part of the total field can be excluded in advance as inherently irrelevant, however mundane, ubiquitous, or apparently tangential it may appear to be. Everything in the field is part of the total organisation and is potentially meaningful. Gestalt therapists are interested in 'the obvious', in rendering afresh what has become invisible and automatic, or is being taken for granted or regarded as of no relevance.

Thus, in therapy for example, an entrenched mannerism, way of moving, or style of speaking may be regarded, by most people including the client, as a 'permanent' personal feature, a fixed characteristic, and thereby a given, and as something not relevant to the matter in hand. Yet, in Gestalt Therapy and field theory nothing can be excluded *a priori* from the investigation.

If we take the analogy of looking critically at paintings which have been exhibited, it is as if the field theorist is not content to just look at the pictures in themselves, but will be open, at least, to the possibility that the style of frames may play an important part in how the paintings are appreciated, or that the context of the exhibition as a whole provides a particular gloss on the nature of the pictures. This openness to anything in the field is not a call for exhaustive inclusion in which each and every contributory influence within the person's or group's reality has to be accommodated. Not only would this be an impossibly infinite exercise, and geared to a static conception of the field, but it is unnecessary; the field is organised and what is most relevant or pressing is readily discoverable in the present. Instead of exhaustively documenting what is in the field, there is attention to what is momentarily or persistently relevant or interesting – and this will show how the field is organised in the moment. The point is, however, that the range of possible relevance is not restricted to some parts of the total field.

An example would be if a medical specialist gives a patient an explanation of his illness, the specialist herself may imagine what is relevant for the patient is how clear she was in providing him with the information. Yet suppose that what *actually* was most relevant (i.e., of present concern) was the degree of personal interest and warmth (or lack of it) the doctor communicated in the course of giving the information: this might be what is really organising the field for the patient, not just the content of the information. Similarly, paying attention to pre-arranged agenda without giving space to what arises in the moment may be persisted with because of a fixed criterion of what is relevant. The reality is that we have to be open to the present configuration of the field, whether anticipated or not.

One particular aspect of the field may be so "invisible" that it is persistently overlooked as having any relevance: the presence of an observer. Yet the observer or commentator or investigator is always part of the total situation and cannot be safely excluded from it. In a similar way, in old style Gestalt therapy groups, the presence of a "hot seat" inevitably is a major part of the framing or context of what happens in the group. Likewise the presence of a video camera can profoundly affect the total situation. The Principle of Possible Relevance reminds us that taking into account the total situation requires doing just that.