

Dialogue in Complex Systems: The Hermeneutical Attitude

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The purpose of this chapter is to deal with the question of how Gestalt therapy's concept of dialogue is applied to group systems. This question is explored with a focus on what kind of *attitude* may be associated with a dialogic stance in the context of group work. Dialogue will be compared to the tradition of *hermeneutics* with the intention of highlighting the ways these two strands of thought have shaped each other and continue to function as supports for the ongoing development of the Gestalt model. This chapter will argue for a more direct application of the hermeneutical attitude, along with a more explicit use of structure, both of which can support the group facilitator in managing the increased levels of complexity that will be shown to characterize work with larger systems. The chapter's conclusion will put forward some political implications of practicing dialogue at the group level; implications that emphasize Gestalt therapy's inherent relational sensibilities.

Concept of Dialogue

Gestalt therapy theory defines dialogue in terms of the cultivation of certain conditions (e.g., presence and inclusion) to ensure support for the kind of awareness we believe restores creativity and balance in the processes of self- and mutual-regulation. However, discussions of the conditions of dialogue are usually embedded in the situation of a dyad, and seldom reference larger systems as the context for understanding and applying the theory of dialogue. As such, there has been a gap in the application of dialogical principles to the more complex tasks associated with group work. In an attempt to address this, a number of Gestalt practitioners who work in groups have recommended a practical integration with group dynamics (Kepner, 1980) or group developmental stage models (Melnick, 1980; Zinker, 1980; Harman, 1984), an integration which has been shown to be potentially problematic (Fairfield, 2004).

Harvatis (2006) brought some attention to this issue, pointing out that discussions of dialogue to date have not adequately addressed group level encounters. I want to express agreement with this opinion; but not because I assume the theory of dialogue is in and of itself inadequate: Rather, it is my opinion that we have not adequately understood and applied the theory to more complex systems. Naturally we are limited by our terms—*I* and *Thou*—since in their most literal sense they say something very clear and specific about the dialogic stance in a two-person system while simultaneously anchoring the idea of dialogue in the dyadic context. Be that as it may, these terms do attempt to describe a particular stance taken in relation to “another,” implying something that goes on between persons, though it might expand our understanding to say that it characterizes a way of orienting to the inevitable “otherness” we all encounter in each other. A meeting between *I* and *Thou* gives way to a deep-reaching appreciation for the unique wholeness, as well as the unavoidable connectedness of persons.

Appreciating a person's wholeness cannot happen without simultaneously appreciating that person's complexity. If we confront some part of the other which either does not seem to fit with our picture of that person or which confuses or even offends us, we may be tempted to avoid or reject that part. Wholeness implies a communion among the parts of the whole. Rejecting a part of the whole is tantamount to rejecting the wholeness of the whole: Wholeness is inseparable from complexity. If a person avoids or rejects some experience of self, it is because the current situation most likely does not favor their integration (e.g., when a person's

sexual orientation evokes disgust or anxiety in others and is therefore suppressed or disowned entirely). This temptation to resist our wholeness is itself a sign of the difficulty human beings seem to face when attempting to hold together what is experienced as complex with various and diverse dimensions. In the face of such a difficulty we need to be supported in our attempts to integrate the different parts of our experience and appreciate how they relate to each other. The *I/Thou* stance offers just such a support, not only because of its associated value for “otherness” but also precisely because such a value naturally invites contact with increasing levels of complexity.

To manage increased complexity, particularly when faced with the multidimensional situation of a group, we are faced with the tasks of holding together many differences of perspective and developing a capacity to tolerate discord. This way of working relies heavily on a certain prejudice: we must start with the assumption that divergent perspectives are *without question* valid and reasonable. Such a prejudice is not easily maintained in a culture bound by the concept of absolute truth, a concept with which Western tradition is always wrestling, particularly in its quest for so called scientific (i.e., scientific) knowledge. We need help cultivating the opposite assumption, namely that points of view which do not match the one most reasonable “from our perspective” are nevertheless valid and consistent with some frame of reference or context not yet understood “by us.” In fact, we need a whole approach to understanding experience that supports a discipline of enquiry steeped in this kind of attitude. We need *hermeneutics*.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics has been described as the development and study of theories of the interpretation and understanding of texts. The concept of “text” is meant to extend beyond the written word to any number of things subject to interpretation. In psychotherapy, we routinely take up complex human experience as the focus of our attention. A hermeneutic enquiry into human experience is an approach to understanding this focus of attention as though it were a dynamic and complex text subject to a variety of interpretations.

Essentially, hermeneutics cultivates an ability to understand things, experiences, and situations, from somebody else’s point of view, and to appreciate the cultural and social forces that may have influenced that outlook. In the last two centuries, the scope of hermeneutics has expanded to include the investigation and interpretation not only of textual and artistic works, but of human behavior generally, including language and patterns of speech, social institutions, and rituals. Hermeneutics interprets or inquires into the meaning and importance of these phenomena, through understanding the point of view of an insider or the first-person perspective of an engaged participant in these phenomena.ⁱ

The hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1989) is the process of understanding a text hermeneutically. It refers to the idea that our understanding of the text *as a whole* is established by reference to the individual parts and our understanding of *each individual part* by reference to the whole. Neither the whole text nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another, and hence, it is a circle.

It is not difficult to see the resemblance between the assumptions of the hermeneutic circle and the presuppositions of Gestalt therapy theory, particularly in the above reference to the relationships among parts of a whole and between those parts and the whole itself.ⁱⁱ This idea is almost a verbatim repetition of language Gestalt therapists have traditionally used to discuss figure/ground phenomena. In Gestalt therapy’s attention to holism, the structure of experience,

and contact, we can see a conspicuous similarity to hermeneutics, and this similarity is perhaps most evident in the Gestalt model of dialogue.ⁱⁱⁱ

Dialogue is our way of fine tuning contact in ways that support the client to appreciate how his or her experience is structured, to notice that this structure is comprised of a multitude of relationships, and to experience himself or herself as “part of” and “party to” that relational structure. Though it aims to “meet” rather than merely “understand” the other, dialogue nevertheless is a form of hermeneutical enquiry precisely because it assumes, and going even further, *confirms* the validity of the other’s perspective. In fact, the dialogic stance guarantees interest in the “otherness” of the other, even when experiencing what is “other” becomes jarring, disorienting or confusing.

The *I/Thou* stance is Gestalt therapy’s hermeneutical attitude: it orients us to embrace not only the “personhood” of the other, but also the “otherness” of the person. In dialogue, we start with the unquestioned assumption that other people are unique and coherent selves whose experience is meaningful and comprehensible no matter how fragmented or disharmonious it may appear to be. We assume others are whole persons and we hold their wholeness by virtue of a confirming attitude and a commitment to meeting them and also bringing ourselves wholly to the encounter. The importance of this has been named and reiterated in Gestalt therapy theory in relation to dyadic work (Yontef, 1993; Hycner and Jacobs, 1996), but has not been explicated well in relation to group work. What I will demonstrate in the following sections is that by working out how the hermeneutical attitude can inform our understanding of group dynamics, we can better define a Gestalt approach to group work as well as generate some ideas about specific strategies for creating dialogic conditions at the group level.

The Economy of Experience

To begin understanding the hermeneutical attitude in group work, I think it is useful to look first at what would *not* be consistent with that approach. I have argued before that ignoring the phenomenological method and the attitudes and principles of field theory when practicing group work is a clear departure from the Gestalt model (Fairfield, 2004). In fact, another way of understanding this departure would be to think about the phenomenological method and field theory principles as measures of our competency in holding the hermeneutical attitude. It is by reframing dialogue in groups in terms of the “attitude” tied to the *I/Thou* stance that we will be able to see more clearly what complicates the practice of dialogue in larger systems.

The hermeneutical attitude carries with it certain assumptions, as mentioned in the previous section, that inconsistencies or dissonances encountered in contact with others, no matter how insignificant they may seem to be, are essential to the whole. In other words, what may seem a minor variance is not superfluous to the integrity of a whole, but rather has a critical role in helping us to understand how our whole experience is structured. An example of an allegedly minor inconsistency would be when a group is surveyed about what to focus on next and most (but not all) group members agree on one topic, while one or two only seem to go along with this decision but do not actually agree. Now it may still be wise to go with what most group members want, but an understanding of the whole group requires taking into account that some, perhaps only a few, seemed to want something different but did not make a strong case to have what they wanted.

The group facilitator’s capacity to remember this point is linked to how well he or she appreciates and manages multiple perspectives among the members of the group. Group work requires an expanded capacity for complexity. However, complexity is often collapsed in

groups, Gestalt groups included. Simplicity is routinely held up as a measure of efficiency and coherence, even at the risk of excluding minority perspectives. One version of this can be observed when a group leader intervenes with a list of points or issues meant to summarize the “essence” of a discussion in progress that nevertheless omits minor inconsistencies or subtle differences, as in the example cited above. Another version plays itself out when someone, often the facilitator, invokes the awareness of time constraints to pressure the group into prematurely conceding to the majority opinion.

I have come to regard this “collapse of complexity”—which is evident not only in group work but in much of our social discourse—as an indicator of our preference for finishing what is unfinished, or managing anxiety provoked by uncertainty and perceived limits on resources. When a discussion leaves too many questions open, I believe it triggers a need to clarify and condense ideas into their simplest form. This need is felt as an impulse to bring order to what is confusing, to draw associations between the novel and the taken-for-granted, in the interest of restoring a condition of familiarity to our experiential world. In this phenomenon we can see a kind of preference for “coming to terms” with novelty or difference *as quickly as possible*.

I have placed the phrase “coming to terms” in quotation marks as a reference to Kurt Goldstein’s use of the phrase. Goldstein argued that the organism comes to terms with its surround in whatever ways are permissible within its specific context and consistent with its nature (1995). The Gestalt therapy value for being explicit, for *coming to the point* as economically and effectively as possible, seems to be an obvious link to Goldstein’s idea. The suggestion is that, beyond mere cultural conditioning, the human organism is compelled by its very nature to confront its situation.

It is “natural” for human beings to simplify when doing so ensures the sustainability of life. This is a clear implication of Goldstein’s point. When confronted by life-challenging circumstances we make rapid judgments that divide the world into quite primitive distinctions, e.g., safe/dangerous, pleasant/aversive, friend/foe, etc. If we are under threat or in the presence of something extremely offensive or noxious, any thought of lingering to explore the situation in detail will be interrupted by a strong impulse to retreat. When we have the luxury of a second or even third glance, when other looming concerns diminish, we can of course appreciate the subtler aspects of our experience, the nuances that provide more complex information about the situation.

It is therefore critical to our survival that we support certain impulses particularly when they point us to immediate safety or soothing, even if they happen also to forestall a wider appreciation for the subtlety and nuance of the current situation. Conversely, if we agree that there is a need to build our capacity to be more discriminating in some situations, we will have to look beyond mere impulse as a guide for appreciating the complexity that comes with more finely discriminated experience.

Coming to terms with the environment takes place on many levels and in many time frames. There is the immediate confrontation that must be endured in the face of sudden changes. Such an urgent situation will certainly call upon the immediate energy of impulse. But there are encounters of a more complex nature, patterns of contacting the enduring features of an environment over long periods of time. The recognition of enduring patterns and themes provides something more than instinctual strivings or sudden reactions. Learning happens over time, through practice, by trial and error, with increasing wisdom, and upon deeper reflection. It is a coming to terms that happens by revisiting what seems to recur in familiar ways and by reevaluating what has eluded our attempts at making sense.

Somewhere between the immediate impulse to make things simple and the gradual inclination to examine them more closely, we find an effective range of permissible contact. By effective I mean that we are able to notice what is necessary to our survival and growth while simultaneously filtering out extraneous details that would otherwise delay or attenuate the sharpness and vividness of our experience. Gestalt therapy has traditionally relied upon a criterion of vividness as the measure of the quality of contact that favors optimal functioning (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1994/1951). This is not merely to foster a certain aesthetic—though I have often observed such an aesthetic being privileged for its own sake—but more importantly because vividness supports the best possibilities for coming to terms with our environment in a way that guarantees survival and enhances growth.

Here a dilemma begins to reveal itself: If it is true that awareness is supported by limiting the influence of variables extraneous to the development of the most compelling figure, it follows that dissonance, or excessive complexity, would bog down the awareness process. Certainly the possibilities to be contacted are numerous, but if the number of possibilities exceeds the threshold of what can be tolerated, nothing but the simplest task can be carried out. The nuances become a heap of clutter when salient organismic needs are persistently foiled. We need to understand the meaningfulness of dissonance if we want to stay engaged with it.

When working with groups, we tend to encounter dissonance in the form of those voices, often experienced as frustrating and annoying, that seem to confound the interests currently gathering momentum: Say that a juicy topic is on the table for discussion and the facilitator polls the group members to get a sense of how interested they are in spending group time on that topic. There seems to be a great deal of excitement and most members appear to agree that the topic is worthy of their time. However, there are some “grumblings.” These are the barely detectable undercurrents of dissatisfaction that all group facilitators notice and sometimes are tempted to dismiss. The conclusion I sometimes draw goes something like this: “Let them speak up and take responsibility for what they want.” This neglects, however, to take up the critical task of enquiring into what features of the group’s various contexts may be ensuring that “grumbling” is the wisest way for these objections to be made. It will not be obvious at first, but these grumblings may be in part due to the effects of race, culture, gender, age and language differences among group members. Sometimes resorting to undermining what is widely accepted is the best way to draw attention to the way in which this wide acceptance has become oppressive to those who stand to lose something as a result of their own perspectives being ignored. Even a cursory investigation into these contextual influences will begin to yield some interesting data regarding the dynamics of oppression. Yet, it is just this kind of investigation which generally gets sacrificed in favor of the economy of experience provided through simplifying and condensing.

Dialogue with Complexity and Context

As I have just suggested, there is an inherent and ongoing tension between simplification for economy’s sake and a commitment to creating the conditions of dialogue. In dialogue the practice of inclusion requires the therapist to turn respectfully toward “the other.” If we take the example of dialogue with a whole group, “the other” is complex, consisting of many persons and therefore many perspectives. In order to hold the group as a whole, the therapist must find some way to take into account the multiple perspectives and various contexts that shape the way in which the group comes together. If the therapist notices contrast—e.g., different perspectives, no

matter how subtle—then this difference is somehow critical to an understanding of the whole and not as sometimes supposed, merely an indicator of the struggle for cohesiveness.

When working with an individual, the therapist is sometimes faced with a similar challenge of holding together disparate or polarized parts of the client's experience. It can be difficult to find integration especially when one part looms large, while others are only weakly expressed, or entirely disowned. Through dialogue, the therapist reaches toward the *integrity* of the other, holding together what is not yet experienced by the client as an integrated whole. It is the therapist's skill in managing the complexity that comes with appreciating the client's wholeness which contributes most profoundly to the client's own capacity to experience himself or herself as whole. Various experiments can be used to heighten that client's awareness of the splitting, or the overvaluation of one part in contrast with the others. These experiments reflect the orientating aim of Gestalt therapy; the heightening of awareness of the structure of the whole situation and the relational interplay of its parts. We know that such awareness is cultivated both through fostering dialogic conditions and by using the phenomenological method.

The therapist also confirms an individual's wholeness by acknowledging and valuing the many relationships, systems, cultures, and conversations that function as background or context to what emerges in the dialogue. Not doing so interferes with a client's growth. To forget or ignore that an individual is embedded in multiple contexts distracts that person from noticing how his or her experience is relationally structured. I will offer an example from the world of Gestalt therapy training. Much of our training happens in the "context" of learning communities, whether or not the communal aspects of such a context are explicitly emphasized or even acknowledged. *Trainee A* may have an unresolved issue with *Trainee B*, who happens to be in a different training group. In such a case where there is an obvious conflict in progress between two members of a community but only one of the members to that conflict is present, it is tempting—especially with our focus on "here and now" vivid experience—to privilege the needs that arise with regard to the suffering of the person nearest to us, while letting other needs go "for the moment." Thus we may be convinced that we are meeting *Trainee A* with compassion and allowing him a free voice and necessary support to work on this conflict. But by attempting to work with *Trainee A* when *Trainee B* is not present, we are isolating them both from the context most relevant to their shared suffering. We mostly do this because it would seem cruel to interrupt what *Trainee A* has to say because it risks silencing his suffering. But we forget that suffering signals work to be done often in complex situations that are difficult to resolve, thereby prolonging pain and discomfort. To try to soothe anyone's discomfort by collapsing the complexity of the larger situation only creates more pain for all involved. Aired feelings often grow into rumors which in turn have the potential to harm those who were involved in the events described but were not present when the description was given. Conflicts are a special case of complexity, not just relational complexity but also personal complexity, and they point us to a very familiar, repetitive dilemma we constantly confront that challenges our capacity to structure our interactions in a more complex way than we are used to having to do.

Groups in particular are vulnerable to the tyranny of simplification, often compelled to manage the sheer volume of competing interests by overlooking what is mistaken as irrelevant to the needs of the moment or even "superfluous." Simplicity is generally defined as that which lies within the parameters of whatever the majority of persons will tend to agree upon. Naturally, the simpler the issues are, the less tangled we get in the possibilities. Accepting the majority opinion or the most proximal vivid need as the threshold of sufficiency keeps the group "moving along." Yet ironically, this sharper, slicker contact has the potential to undermine the

group's capacity to appreciate the complex web of connections from which it emerges and consequently interferes with that same profound sense of wholeness which we would strive to support when working with an individual.

Now the tyranny of simplicity is not idiosyncratic to therapy groups. We can look to the larger socioeconomic situation and see a similar trend. For example, living as we do in the U.S. in a primarily market-based economy, we are pressured to "streamline" decision-making by marginalizing minority perspectives (i.e., taking our cues from what *most* customers want). A market operates on the assumption that consumers will pursue ownership of certain goods, the goods which are currently "in demand," literally *demand*ed by those consumers who have the most currency to spend on acquiring those goods. This pursuit of exclusive property *is necessarily* a competition among consumers. The successful acquisition of that property puts the owner at an advantage over any others who may want to use that property at their own discretion. Private enterprise fosters exclusion by definition: having a greater advantage means having greater influence in shaping the conditions of the market. In this broader context, any form of grouping—bringing different people together to work on a common goal—at least potentially will evoke market dynamics. If people who are socialized to be "consumers" are brought together and told there is a limited amount of time (which is a resource) to be used by 7 to 10 people, this may cultivate the familiar pattern of competition for desired goods that leads to certain people soothing their concerns about being excluded by "hoarding" time as opposed to merely taking their fair share of time.^{iv} We can see these conditions operating in groups in various ways, for example the struggle to reserve time for our "own" needs, the race to get into the conversation, grabbing for attention or interrupting and overlapping others who are speaking, etc.

For those of us in democratic and market-driven societies, it is inevitable that exclusions, distortions and power disparities will pervade our customary practices of social discourse. Yet I believe that these conditions are actually critiqued by the hermeneutical attitude of dialogue precisely because that attitude holds open a space in our discourse for disagreement and contrast. It is not by parceling out bits of time in exactly equal amounts that we work against power disparities in larger systems. It would be impossible to put everyone at the same level of participation or influence in a group. Rather, we level the playing field by modeling a value for diversity and variety and by permitting unpopular and divergent perspectives a space in the life of a group.

We need to make a clear distinction between an openness to difference and a demand for equality. Dialogue does not guarantee equality. More to the point, a demand for equal treatment can be just as oppressive as the tyranny of the dominant perspective if it does not allow us to admit differences in degrees of influence or power. In individual work we are not aiming to grant each part of the person equal time to speak or equal influence in taking action. In group work neither should we strive to redistribute the resources of time and attention merely to equalize the shares across all parties. A group develops over time; at any point in the group's development some perspectives may have greater influence than others. Making a moral imperative out of equal participation does not ultimately support a group's developmental needs. It is only when certain perspectives persistently overpower others that a problematic disparity exists. We need to be sensitive to context; the group's context evolves and expresses its influence through dynamics and patterns. The goal is to notice patterns—e.g., that someone has been very quiet for a long time or someone else has been very noisy during most group

sessions—not to criticize or counteract what is noticed, but to bring attention to it and manage the complex experience it may evoke in the group.

Complexity and the Explicit

Having a flexible structure to support our navigation of complexity in groups is what will help us to maintain the same *I/Thou* stance in group work that we strive to hold in our work with individuals. Fortunately we can find this needed structural support by drawing from what we already know about dialogue in dyadic work. 1) We know that the therapist fosters dialogue through genuine presence. A factor that complicates the therapist's presence in a group is accessibility: how can the group leader be accessed by all the various group members in the same way that the individual therapist is available to the complex self-revelations of the individual client? 2) We know that dialogue is also cultivated by the inclusion of the client's whole experience. What makes inclusion tricky in a group context is the challenge of managing complexity; how does the group facilitator maximize the participation of all the group members in the same way that the individual therapist creates a space into which the individual client can bring himself or herself more fully?

One way I have attempted to deal with these questions is by thinking about dialogue with groups in terms of striving for high levels of transparency for myself and pushing for a high degree of explicit communication among group members. A group facilitator creates the conditions for dialogue in a group system by increasing access in all directions and by supporting the emergence of increased levels of complexity. It has been my experience that by striving for the greatest degree of transparency I can ensure group members access to myself, thereby cultivating my genuine presence in the group. It is through encouraging group members to express their unique and different perspectives openly that I have been able to increase their access to each other, thereby fostering an inclusive group process. The terms are slightly different than the ones we are used to using when discussing dialogue, though the concepts are not all that dissimilar. To be present is both to reach and to be reachable, whether in the context of a dyad or a group. Inclusion works to give clients a voice in the relationship, whether the client is an individual or a whole group. However, there are elements of relating we simply take for granted in a dyadic encounter that must be made *more explicit* in a group encounter (e.g., which persons are being addressed and when, who has the floor and for how long, to whom a particular issue is important and to whom it is not, etc.). In fact, it is by being explicit about most things that the group facilitator gradually builds support for the emergence of diversity and creates a space for many perspectives, even the unpopular ones.

A highly participatory group process assures that the perspectives and needs of “all” members—not merely “most” members—are somehow taken into account. I will reiterate that by “taken into account” I do not mean every voice has *equal influence* in determining the outcomes of decision-making; as mentioned earlier this would actually work against efforts to safeguard diversity by potentially inhibiting the ascendance of certain perspectives which are more relevant to a particular decision than others. To take every voice into account is to consider every voice as *potentially* relevant to the issue at hand and to guard against prejudices that threaten to suppress any voice for unfair reasons. This is a link to both the field principle of *organization*^v and the phenomenological practice of *horizontalization*^{vi}.

Grouping always brings together multiple interests and needs that compete for attention and resources (e.g., time, space, energy). Even a Gestalt process group, with its focus on tracking emergent phenomena, must nevertheless be strategic in order to deal with the dilemma

of sorting out issues as basic as how often to meet, at what time, or in what place and as complex as how to get started, whose issues to take up first, how much time to allot, how much emotionality to permit, or what kinds of experiments to attempt. All this demands structure; leaving these decisions to chance will merely reinstate the conditions that work against dialogue (i.e., the tyranny of simplification, the competition for attractive resources, the domination of the majority perspective, etc.).

Structuring group process is about making the choice points explicit. Gestalt therapy is concerned with choices, with people having the freedom and the awareness to make choices and notice what follows, then to make different choices and to notice what happens, and to continue experimenting with creative forms of coming to terms with the world. Without an explicit structure that encourages varied forms of participation over time, it is highly probable that some members of a group will miss opportunities to choose a different way of engaging with the others in the group. I am not suggesting that by missing opportunities to interact differently an individual will have less power to influence the group process; in fact, that would be the kind of influence that runs the risk of tyrannizing the group process just as much as the influence of the classic “group hog.” The excluded minority can end up having a profound effect on what is possible for the majority. In individual work, a similar dynamic occurs when alienated parts of a patient’s experience are “underrepresented” in his or her expression but ultimately “overdetermine” the patient’s course of action. Were we simply to trust the dominant aspects to be those most important to the patient’s individual work, then we would be excluding parts of the whole rather than holding them together and in contrast with each other. It is the *whole* person we are aiming to include in the dialogue.

I am proposing that we strive for no less in relation to a whole group. If we do not encourage diversity and contrast among group members, then we risk polarizing those parts of the whole that succeed in coming to the foreground against those features of the field that temporarily serve to frame what is figural. If we believe that perspectives held by the majority of group members can be trusted to represent adequately the interests of the whole group, we are essentially importing the political strategy of “majority rule” into the domain of group work. This strategy actually reinforces the very system whose conditions have disenfranchised minority perspectives in the first place.

Dialogue Addresses Power Disparities

Just as the privileging of the majority perspective risks a continued marginalization of minorities, so too does the imbalance of power inherent in the client/therapist relationship. The therapist has historically been granted comparatively more access to information than has the client. The therapist has access to the perspectives and experiences of the client, while the client is denied access to those of the therapist (or is denied the right to confirm the validity of his or her perceptions of the therapist). An imbalance of access equals an imbalance of power. The Gestalt tradition has sought to address this by encouraging the therapist to be transparent. Being *present* is not merely an opportunity for self-expression; it gives the other access to our own experiences, information, and perspectives. Being *inclusive* ensures that the other’s experiences, information and perspectives can be considered, respected and valued. Dialogue encourages a greater balance of access in the therapeutic relationship; this inevitably adjusts the power differential even if it does not remove limitations that come with different roles and responsibilities (e.g., the therapist’s time availability, office location, fee scale, level of technical skill, knowledge, education, etc.).

In dyadic work, this increase of access for both therapist and client is obvious. Both members of the dyad are encouraged to be present; both are included in the dialogue. The therapist is held responsible as a guardian of the dialogic conditions. She is vigilant to those moments when the client has been somehow barred from giving a voice to his own experience. She makes sure to bring her own perspective forward honestly in the dialogue whenever appropriate, allowing the client access to her process whenever it will not distract from the client's primary aim. The therapist is continually encouraging the client's participation simply by participating in the interaction. She makes space for both herself and the patient to have a voice without calling attention to that space. It is implicit in the conversation; there is little need to make explicit the *choice* to participate in the dyadic context.

Alternatively, the group facilitator must be far more explicit about choice points in the group process—choices about how much time can be used, which members are welcome to speak and about what, and when certain voices can be left out of a discussion. A group is like an organism with each part regulated by the interests of the whole. Creative adjustment is an exquisite mutual regulation which depends on continuous feedback and exchange of information. The bulk of what gets communicated among group members will happen implicitly and subtly but what is obvious and “goes without saying” for some may require more explicit clarification for others. To ensure that information is clear and readily available, group members must be encouraged to state explicitly what they are expecting and wanting from each other and from the group facilitator. However, this task must be balanced with a corresponding task of encouraging and deepening what is already being expressed. Achieving such a balance is challenging for the most skilled group leader.

Example

I want to give an example that serves to illustrate this challenge. During a session that occurred approximately six months into the life of a newly formed group, an individual in the group gave voice to her frustration that there were a number of people who didn't “say anything.” Labeling them the “quiet ones,” she continued her criticism by saying how angry she felt, and that they needed to get over whatever fear it was that was keeping them silent. A number of other group members joined in with what quickly came to feel like something of a moralistic tirade, which clearly privileged expressiveness over silence. Even if the group leader had been tempted to explore the issues raised among individuals in the group, the conversation had gathered the kind of momentum that would have made this difficult. The issues raised touched on concerns relevant for the whole group and required an intervention that somehow managed to frame the dilemma as a group issue, and one that invited exploration of judgments raised and an eliciting of the broader group experience. However this needed to be done in a way that was equitable and which avoided privileging those louder voices in the group by colluding with their need for the quieter ones to speak up.

Resorting to having a conversation among individuals would have resulted in a foreclosure on allowing the group to sit with the dilemma that the group leader was facing. As an alternative, the leader chose to make her dilemma explicit to the group and to invite group members to reflect on what function or purpose the qualities of expressiveness and quietness might have in the group.

The group then constructed an experiment, whereby someone was asked to split the group into those that were expressive or noisy, and those that were considered to be silent or quiet. Those nominated as quiet then formed a smaller group in the center of the room and

carried on a conversation in which they explored how they understood silence in the group and what function it served in the life of the group. The rest of the group observed “in silence.” Interestingly, the conversers concluded that the privileging of expressiveness over quietness risked the possibility that contact in the group might remain merely reactive and superficial, even if it simultaneously gave voice to the group’s energetic life. The discussion was then broadened to include the observers in the conversation. What followed was a very rich exploration of the range of fears around the deepening of intimacy that might occur if a greater degree of reflective engagement could be supported in the group. Not surprisingly, it was a conversation in which many more group members were able to voice their perspectives.

This example illustrates how important it is for a group leader to hold the wholeness of the group by reframing what may appear to be characteristics of individuals or subgroups as necessary and diverse functions for the sustainable life of the group. The fact that certain group members tend to take on a particular function consistently, and even at times inflexibly, may say something about their characteristic ways of self-regulating, but this fact will also serve to point out how essential that frequently held function has become to the group’s regulation, enough that certain individuals are willing to become tyrannized by the responsibility to hold it. Loosening tightly held positions is a fairly familiar Gestalt experiment and can often lead to a more flexible movement between attention to figure and attention to ground. In the above example, the outcome of offering this experiment was that a more complex development of diverse perspectives was supported and valued by the whole group.

Conclusion: Gestalt Group Work as Activism

To assemble together a group of persons we must accept from square one that whatever resources become available as a result of that assembly will have to be divided in some fashion amongst all its members. The very act of bringing people together necessarily introduces the need to negotiate time, space, attention, energy, priority, etc. The patterns that control how resources get distributed in the broader sociopolitical context are bound to influence how they will get distributed in the groups we facilitate. If we believe that those patterns are unjust or unfortunate, then perhaps we are in a position to disrupt those patterns in the way we facilitate groups.

Clearly I am advocating political activism in group work, whether small groups, large groups, organizations, communities, nations, etc. That activism is not unrelated to the political philosophies that so profoundly influenced the evolution of our theory. Perhaps this is easier to notice in the case of working with groups than in the case of working with individuals, since a grouping of many persons more dramatically resembles a political entity. Even so, it is no less the case in work with individuals that we are taking political action.

Holding one another responsible for, but also competent at, determining the course of our own lives is a political act. It is a form of activism to insist on making space for another human being to “be” where he or she is and to be free to reach for what he or she needs. In an industry such as mental health which has been so profoundly influenced by paternalism, it is revolutionary for a professional service provider to form a true partnership with a client, a collaboration in which the client is held as an authority on the subject of his or her own experience. In a field dominated by behavior change approaches, it is truly visionary to understand that change flows paradoxically from the acceptance of what is. Dialogue is a political act, and not one restricted to the dyadic encounter. If it is revolutionary to form a true partnership with another individual, then it is all the more radical when the same kind of

partnership is formed in a group. When applied to larger systems, we can see with profound clarity the possibilities dialogue can have both for individual growth and radical social change.

Gestalt therapy may well be at the cutting edge of consumer-driven services. If this is true, it is precisely because we have a theory that supports us in the effort to include the client's perspective. Incorporating the client's voice in service planning not only guarantees him or her the right to "consume" services at will, but also fosters the client's core sense of agency and creativity. Still, I believe we may be missing the opportunity to assume a dialogic stance in group work if we are not careful to oppose a "tyranny of the majority" in the groups we are leading. Our ethics of care encourage us to interrupt the "free market" and "democratic" sensibilities that can so easily creep into the Gestalt group encounter. In our hermeneutical attitude of dialogue, we have an alternative to the majority rule system.

My aim has been to demonstrate how the hermeneutical attitude supports openness to what is not yet understood, and curiosity to understand more. I have attempted to show how that attitude helps the group leader to structure the group process in ways that lead to the confirmation of the wholeness of the group, in the same way the individual therapist confirms the integrity and validity of the client in dyadic encounters. I have also attempted to demonstrate that by supporting the group's experience of increased complexity, the group leader has the opportunity to include and confirm increasingly more aspects of the group as a whole. I have suggested that it may be difficult to manage our feelings when confronted by increasing levels of complexity, but that we can benefit from developing the skills and resources to stay engaged with this challenge in the service of the dialogic stance. In short, I have argued that dialogue in any group intervention depends on the capacity to manage increased complexity in the process of identifying diverse and multiple perspectives and the commitment not to collapse that complexity prematurely. Our dialogic theory is not inherently inadequate to support us in this endeavor, but we must understand and consistently emphasize the hermeneutical attitude if we are to expand our competence in working with complex systems.

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ⁱ The origins of the hermeneutical tradition can be traced loosely to the middle ages and even earlier to ancient Greek philosophers; however, its most significant developments in contemporary philosophy are generally credited to the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher in the 18th century, Wilhelm Dilthey in the 19th century, and Martin Heidegger and his pupil Hans-Georg Gadamer in the 20th century.

ⁱⁱ Framing the therapeutic process in terms of the hermeneutic circle is the direct contribution of the work of Frank Staemmler and Lynne Jacobs in their ongoing interest in examining the philosophical influences of Gestalt therapy, both historically and currently.

ⁱⁱⁱ This similarity is probably not accidental. We know, for example, that Laura Perls studied with Paul Tillich, and of course Tillich was involved in the heady theological debates that followed the emergence of Bultmann's and Heidegger's thinking. Buber and Tillich also influenced each other and of course Laura was heavily influenced by Buber. It also seems probable that Lewin and Tillich had contact during this period through their connections with the Berlin Group in the early 20th century.

^{iv} In group work, fairness is usually defined according to the assessment of need, though the assessment is often loosely performed by the facilitator who then validates his or her assessment against the (majority of the) group.

^v "Meaning derives from looking at the total situation, the totality of coexisting facts" (Parlett, p. ??, 1991)

^{vi} "Having stuck to an immediate experience which we seek to describe, this rule further urges us to avoid placing any initial hierarchies of significance or importance upon the terms of our descriptions, and instead to treat each initially as having equal value or significance" (Spinelli, 1989).