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ABSTRACT

While General Systems Theory (GST) concepts appear to be applicable in explaining some of the phenomena that occur in a Gestalt Therapy group, research is needed to support this assumption. General Systems Theory may not be a group theory per se. Instead, GST may be a theory about groups. A meta-theory exists where its value and usefulness is found in the theory's ability for describing phenomena common to all group theories. Nevertheless, GST certainly acknowledges: (1) the individual as a multi-system person; (2) the therapist as the most important person in the group; (3) the emotional-cognitive process as a system; (4) the importance of the boundary concept; (5) that the importance of the boundary functions, systeming and summing, and that emotional exchanges are not long lasting; (5) there are various levels for intervention within a group, including intrapsychic, interpersonal, and group, and intervention can occur at any level; and (6) the unique advantages of the therapist "thinking systems" with the focus on process instead of content thinking. The interactions within a therapeutic group and attempts to transpose one theory to another are complex; General Systems Theory thinking is new and highly complex. (ABL)

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GESTALT THERAPY
AND
GENERAL SYSTEM THEORY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper General System Theory (GST) concepts are applied to a Gestalt Therapy group in order to demonstrate GST's value for describing group therapy phenomena.

GESTALT THERAPY AND GENERAL SYSTEM THEORY

General System Theory (GST) concepts and how the concepts relate to group psychotherapy are presented by J. E. Durkin (1981a). The text, Living Groups, is written for the highly skilled therapist who is interested in theory. Glasser (1983, p. 87) says, "Even if readers have strong social science backgrounds, most will find it difficult to follow much of the material." J. E. Durkin (1981a), as editor, says:

The mission of the GST committee is to explore the ways in which GST can clarify the theory and improve the practice of group therapy, but no single spokesperson has been able to accomplish both parts of this mandate....One of the problems that has faced the members of the GST committee is that we never seem to get around to coming up with clinical examples, a procedure that is de rigueur for all clinical reporting. At first we thought it was just a matter of time -- after we really got the concepts down pat, the examples would simply fall into our hands. But we have done that and the clinical examples are still a problem. (p. 284)

In the first section of this paper a system concept of the group members is presented. In the second section, GST

concepts that are relevant to group therapy are described. In the last, or third section, the concepts are applied to a Gestalt Therapy group in order to demonstrate GST's applicability for describing group phenomena.

GROUP COMPOSITION

The Individual

A system is defined by Brown (1981, p. 292) "...as an organization of parts in dynamic interaction. The properties of the system consist of more than the aggregate of the proportion of the individual parts and interactions; the organized whole is more than the sum of the parts." Brown says that it is possible to view any organization of parts as an entity, or system, and the viewing is what is known as the holon phenomenon. However, he never assigns a meaning to the term holon. Minuchin and Fishman (1981) use the word holon which was created by Arthur Koestler. Koestler coined the word because he felt Western language was inadequate for describing certain phenomena. "The word holon is derived from the Greek word holos (whole) with the suffix on (as in proton or neutron), which suggest a particle or part" (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981, p. 13). The word is valuable for its descriptive purposes. Every holon -- the individual, the dyad, the triad, the family, the group, the community -- is both a whole and a part, not more one than the other. Part

and whole contain each other in a continuing, current, and ongoing process.

The individual holon incorporates the concept of self-in-context. To illustrate the concept, the following example is used. An individual who retires from society and decides to live in solitude is labeled a hermit. People think of a hermit as a person who lives alone and does not interact or communicate with other people. This is accurate and raises the question, "Is the hermit a holon?" or, stated differently, "Does the hermit live with self-in-context?" Based on the work of communication specialist Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) the answer is yes. A basic premise of these authors is that a person cannot not communicate. Communication and interaction being synonymous, means that the hermit lives with self-in-context, or as a holon, because he/she interacts with the physical world in which he/she lives. The hermit affects the environment, the environment affects the hermit -- both are an organization of parts in interaction with each other. Therefore, even a hermit is a holon -- an individual system because he/she lives with his/her self-in-context.

The Dyad

Wilmot (1975) says that communicating with others is an inescapable factor of our existence and that we spend approximately three-fourths of our waking time in communication with others. He defines dyadic communication

as any direct communicative transaction between two people, whether it be fleeting or recurring, as long as one person assigns meaning to the other person's behavior. The assignment of meaning to someone's behavior is not an objective fixed event as Wilmot points out. The assignment of meaning, or impressions, happens within a person's mind. It is a personal process and, regardless of what is said or done, a person cannot control the impressions or perceptions of others. The point -- when interaction takes place there is more than one interpretation of the interaction.

Of all the possible combinations of people interacting with each other the dyadic relationship is the most prevalent and the most intimate (Wilmot, 1975). According to Wilmot the basic building block of a group is the dyad, because the loss of one is the loss of all. As the membership of a group grows, the number of potential relationships increase at an incredible rate as shown in Figure 1.

<u>Group Membership</u>	<u>Potential Relationships</u>
2	1
3	6
4	25
5	90
6	301
7	966

Figure 1. POTENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN GROUPS

(Adapted from Dyadic Communication by W. Wilmot, 1975, p. 19. Copyright 1975 by Random House Inc. This and other citations from source adapted by permission.)

The Triad

A triad is a social system composed of three people transacting face-to-face (Wilmot, 1975). Wilmot graphically presents a truly triadic relationship as shown in Figure 2. Each outward curve represents a person and it is evident they are all joined together.

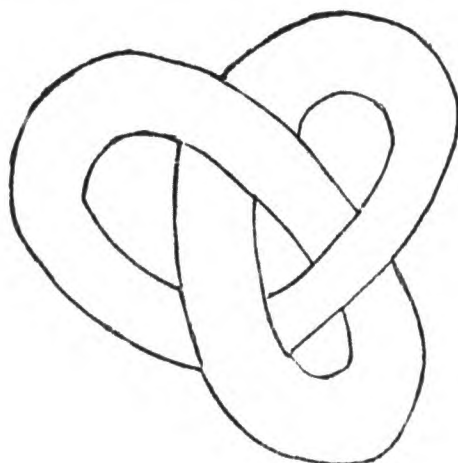


Figure 2: A TRIADIC RELATIONSHIP

(Adapted from Dyadic Communication, p. 21.)

In regard to the triadic relationship Wilmot (1975) states:

The three people are obviously intertwined with one another. Such a pure set of relationships, however, rarely if ever exists. A triad, as represented in Figure 2, where the power and influence of all three members are equal is not normal but on the contrary is extraordinarily rare. (p. 20)

He continues by adding:

From a functional standpoint (looking at the relationship), there is no such thing as a triad; there is only a primary dyad plus one. There is no triadic relationship that is so stable and complete that each individual may not, under certain circumstances, be regarded as an intruder. (p. 21)

In a triadic relationship, Wilmot (1975) says that it is normal for one member to be isolated, suppressed, or excluded from complete participation. The traditional triadic relationships, a primary dyad plus a third person, as presented by Wilmot is shown in Figure 3.

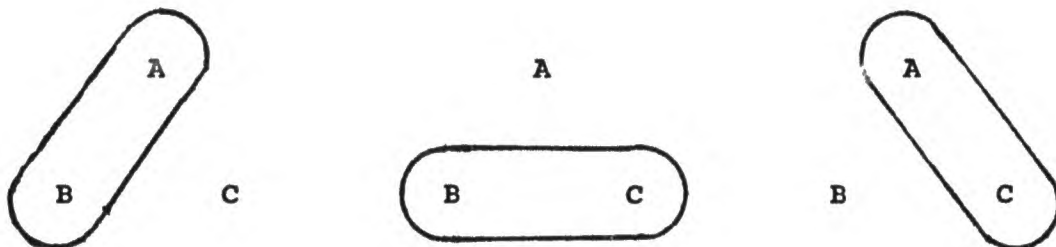


Figure 3: A TRADITIONAL TRIADIC RELATIONSHIP: A PRIMARY DYAD PLUS ONE

(Adapted from Dyadic Communication, p. 22.)

However, as indicated in Figure 1, a small group of three contains six potential relationships. These six potential relationships exist, according to Wilmot (1975), as illustrated in Figure 4.

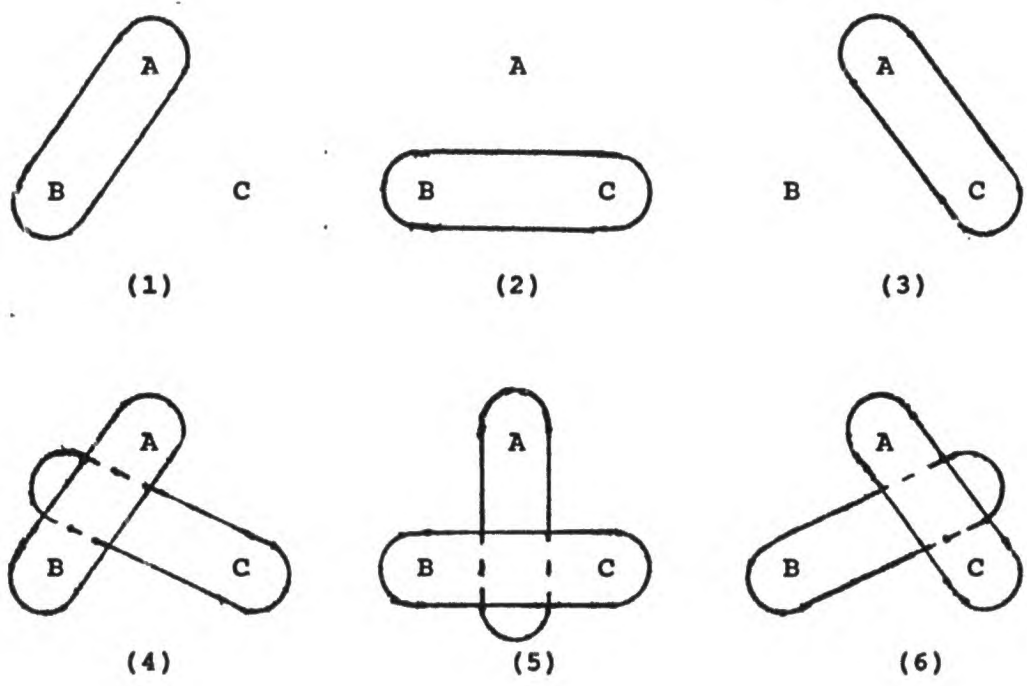


Figure 4: THREE INDIVIDUALS EQUAL ONE RELATIONSHIP
 (Adapted from Dyadic Communication, p. 23.)

In Figure 4, diagrams 1, 2, and 3 show three potential relationships -- a dyad plus one. The other three potential relationships, diagrams 4, 5, and 6 as illustrated by Wilmot (1975), show that a triad makes two dyads. According to Wilmot, if the A and B relationship has developed into a strong coalition, then C has to treat the A and B dyadic relationship as a single entity. Therefore, as shown in diagram 4, person C is in a relationship with the A and B dyad.

The elaboration of triadic relationships serves to make a point. The point is that Wilmot (1975) recognizes in diagram 4 (Figure 4) that the A and B dyadic relationship has to be different than the A and B dyadic relationship in diagram 1 (Figure 4). If not, what happens with C in diagram 4? Diagram 1 already exist. Wilmot uses the magic of words to provide C with a relationship in diagram 4. His explanation is that a "strong coalition" has formed between the A and B dyad, and the strong coalition makes the A and B dyadic relationship a single entity. Wilmot is aware that when A and B form a relationship that a new creation has occurred. However, in reality, it is Wilmot's semantic technique of transformation that makes the A and B creation a single entity. The rationale is so Wilmot can have C -- a single entity -- interact with the AB entity. Correctly stated, Wilmot should have said that the AB relationship formed a new holon, or a new system, or a new entity and, when the C holon interacts with the AB holon, a new holon (ABC) is formed. However, such a statement would conflict with Wilmot's premise that there is no triadic relationship, only a dyad plus one.

In a triad all members affect and are affected by each other. How they organize themselves in the relationship is another issue. The point -- when a third party enters an existing relationship, the existing relationship is changed to a new relationship simply by the third party's entrance.

One relationship has been changed to another relationship -- not one relationship to two relationships.

The Therapist

According to GST theorists (H. E. Durkin, 1981a; J. E. Durkin, 1981a; Gray, 1981a; Mendell, 1981), the therapist, who is also a holon, is the most important member of a group. The therapist is the catalyst. He/she can make things happen or impede their progress. Group members respect the therapist's position and look to him/her for leadership. Describing the therapist entrance into a therapeutic relationship Minuchin and Fishman (1981) say:

So family [group] and the therapist form a partnership, with a common goal that is more or less formulated....Two social systems have joined for a specific purpose and for a certain time. Now the functions of the participants in the therapeutic system must be defined. The therapist is in the same boat with the family [group], but he must be the helmsman....The therapist does not yet know the idiosyncrasies of this particular family [group] dance, but he has seen many family [group] dances. He also has his own genetic coding and his own life experience. He brings an idiosyncratic style of contacting, and a theoretical set. The family [group] will have to accommodate to this package,

in some fashion or another, and the therapist will have to accommodate to them. In most cases the family [group] will accept the therapist as leader of the partnership. Nevertheless, he will have to earn his right to lead. Like every leader, he will have to accommodate, seduce, submit, support, direct, suggest, and follow in order to lead....He knows that by becoming a member of the therapeutic system, he will be subjected in its demands. He will be channeled into traveling certain roads in certain ways at certain times. Sometimes he will be aware of the channeling; other times he will not even recognize it. He must accept the fact that he will be buffeted by the implicit demands that organize the family [group] members' behavior. (p. 29) (the word group has been added)

The Group

The individual holon, including the leader holon, enters a group with his/her own uniqueness and own life experiences. This entrance into a group creates a new holon. The new group holon is a highly complex multi-individual system, but, like most holons, the new group holon is only a subsystem of larger units -- the neighborhood, the community, the city, the society as a whole. Ideally, the new holon could be depicted as shown in Figure 5.

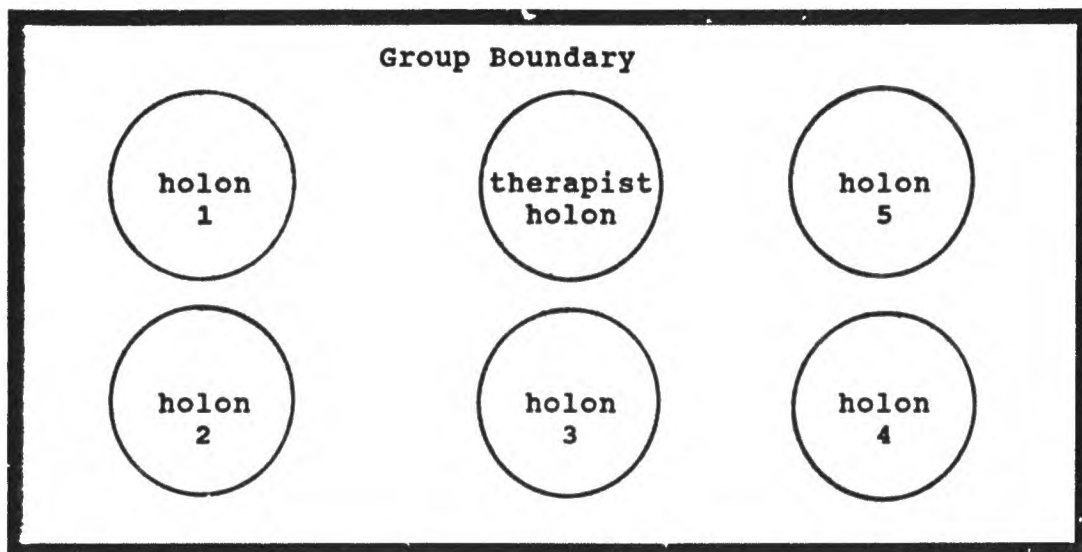


Figure 5: PORTRAYING AN IDEAL GROUP HOLON

The rectangle in Figure 5 represents a group holon formed by individual holons. It is easy to visualize the group as a unit and to see each individual as a holon of that unit. But the individual includes other aspects of self that are not contained within the individual as a holon of that group. Figure 5 is idealistic but does not portray reality because, in reality, the group holon would best be represented by Figure 6.

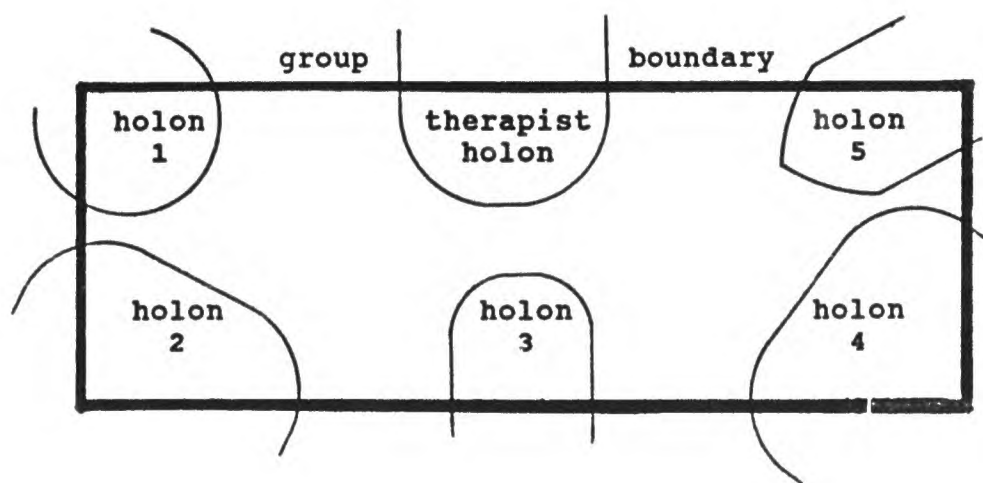


Figure 6: PORTRAYING A GROUP HOLON IN REALITY

(adopted from Family Therapy Techniques by S. Minuchin and H. C. Fishman, 1981, p. 15. Copyright 1981 by Harvard University Press. This and other citation from source adopted by permission).

Again, the rectangle in Figure 6 represents a group holon. Each curve represents an individual group member who can only have certain segments of the self included in the group holon organism. In order to illustrate the individual holon's existence in the group holon, and for the purpose of clarity, one part of the group holon and one part of the individual holon is shown in Figure 7.

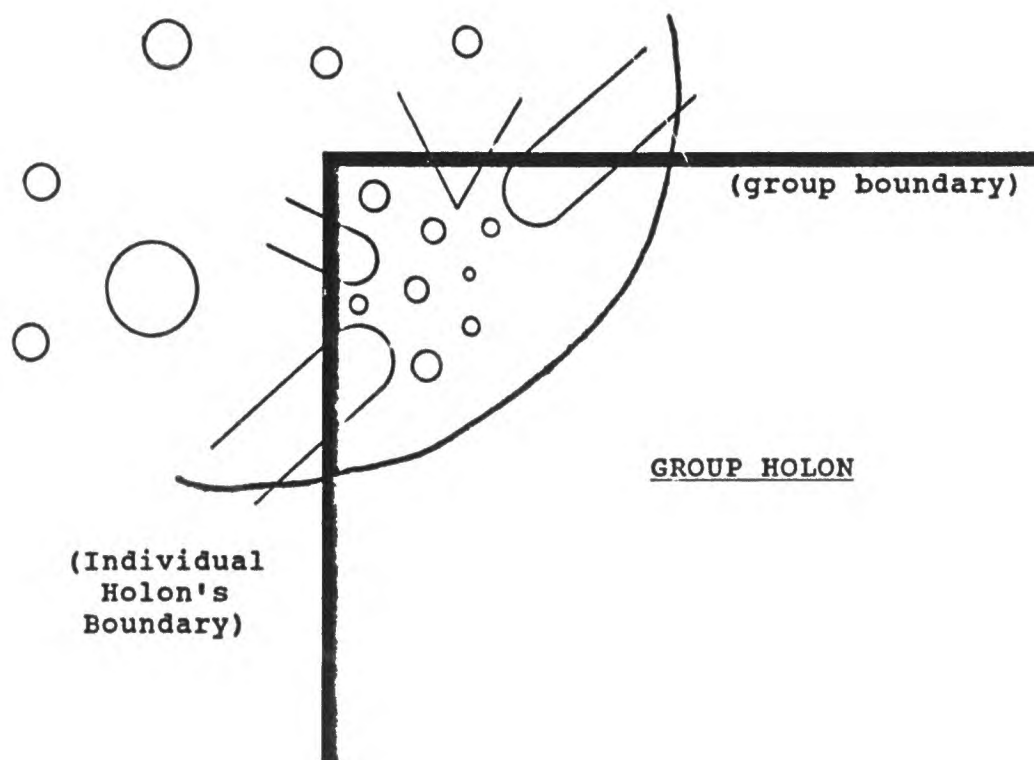
INDIVIDUAL HOLON

Figure 7: AN INDIVIDUAL HOLON'S EXISTENCE IN A GROUP HOLON

(Adapted from Family Therapy Techniques, p. 15.)

Figure 7 demonstrates that it would be impossible for each individual holon to be totally within the group holon. It could be argued that the human mind provides individuals with the ability to be totally in the here and now. This ability would allow individual holons access to total entrance

into a new holon. However, total entrance into the here and now is unachievable even if the individual holon wants it to happen. The complexity of the human mind and the thinking process is exactly what restricts individuals from being able to bring themselves totally to the present. The inevitable fact that part of the individual always remains outside of the new holon makes it impossible for any individual holon to be totally in the here and now. Some examples of the parts of individual holons that remain outside a new holon are experiences, relationships, commitments, responsibilities, and future plans to name a few. Human beings always have some outside business which they believe they must attend. The point -- when individual holons enter a group, only certain aspects of themselves will be present in the new holon they help create.

MAJOR CONCEPTS OF GENERAL SYSTEM THEORY

General System Theory (GST) concepts are presented in this section. For an in-depth explanations regarding these concepts refer to Living Groups, edited by J. E. Durkin (1981a).

Emotion-Cognition

Traditionally, many approaches to therapy have focused on the here and now and the present feelings of clients. The client is told to "stay out of your head...you are

intellectualizing again...what are you feeling...stay with your feelings...etc." Paradoxically, however, the client is told to "recall...what past event makes you...what makes you feel..." The therapist instructs the client to recall a previous situation and bring it to the present moment. The client reexperiences the past event while the therapist assists the client to shuttle between his/her feelings and the past. In other words, the therapist has the client think, then feel, think, then feel, and so on. As an analogy, the process is the same as a movie of a ping-pong game that is being shown in slow-motion -- the client oscillates between emotions and cognitions.

GST and other theorists recognize the importance of the total emotional-cognitive process. As H. E. Durkin (1981a, p. 20) states, "Cognition alone is sterile; but emotions alone are too evanescent..." J. E. Durkin (1981b) considers thoughts as system formations between emotions and cognitions, while Ellis (1973) says thoughts -- how an individual perceives an event -- control feelings. Which is first, emotions or cognitions is not important according to Gray (1981b, p. 305) who states, "The key, then, is that emotions and cognitions must system form with each other..." To clarify the emotional-cognitive process a return to the ping-pong movie will suffice. Instead of viewing the ball's flight in slow-motion the projector's speed is increased to a point where the ball looks like a continuous white streak

across the table between the two players -- this represents the emotional-cognitive process in action. The importance of the emotion-cognition link is acknowledged by GST and other theorist who view the process of thinking and feeling as vital for transformation (H. E. Durkin, 1981b; Gray, 1981a).

Energy

Gruen (1981) defines and describes his concept of an energy force. He calls the energy force nurtenergy. Nurtenergy, according to Gruen, is a specific psychic energy operating in groups and combines aspects of the nurturant group environment with other energy and information. The author says, "...this energy can either be diffuse or highly concentrated like a laser beam and then targeted more functionally toward selected persons" (p. 86). Gruen sees the therapist as the primary person in the group who has nurtenergy to give or invest "...because of his or her negentropic functioning and because of his or her knowledge of the dynamics of change" (p. 87). The client feeds off the therapist's nurtenergy. The nurtenergy acts as an auxiliary force with the client's potential energy and eventually helps the client to reorganize his or her faulty investments. The therapist acts only as a catalyst, or initiator, because eventually the client's nurtenergy grows and, at a point, becomes available to other group members. Ultimately, the

therapist is less of an energy provider which frees him or her to attend to other group work.

Another energy force is Kraft's (1981) concept of swirls of Emotional energy. Swirls of emotional energy, according to Kraft, is based on the premises that: 1) groups exist in order to process emotional energy; and 2) swirls of emotional energy (patterns of energy flow) are generated by the co-mingling and co-production of energy by group members. Kraft believes when two group members interact with each other they not only send a message to each other but they also emit energy which mutually affects all members of the group. Emotional energy is neither good nor bad, positive nor negative, efficient nor inefficient, intelligible nor non-intelligible. Once swirls of emotional energy become known or detected, each group member can attach his or her own perception to that energy. Kraft says any movement of energy involves four hierarchical levels of structure or organization of energy. These levels are biochemical, intrapsychic, interpersonal, and sociocultural. Also, after a period of intense outflow and interflow of emotional energy the group often lapses into a lower level of energy output.

Boundary

Boundary is a structural term. Ulschak and Rath (1981) say that the boundary between a system and its environment is determined by a decision of the system analyst. Stanton

(1981) defines boundary as the rules which determine who participates and how. Living, or open systems have permeable boundaries which the system is inherently capable of opening or closing. Consequently, each system is able to exchange energy and information with other systems and with the environment (H. E. Durkin, 1981a; J. E. Durkin, 1981b, 1981c). The system's boundary defines the holon.

Summing/Systeming

Summing and systeming are complementary events that take place at boundaries (J. E. Durkin, 1981c). Summing occurs when holons make contact with each other across closed boundaries. Systeming occurs when holons open their boundaries to other holons. Both events, summing and systeming, are important for the holon to become more autonomous. J. E. Durkin says that summing occurs first. Two holons interact and there is a cognitive flow exchange of information across closed boundaries -- this is summing. Ultimately, one of the holons, or both, will open his/her boundary and an emotional flow exchange will occur -- this is systeming. Systeming, according to J. E. Durkin, is not long lasting. Therefore, holons spend most of their time summing and do systeming only when their boundaries are open. Systeming allows for transformation and the movement toward autonomy.

Structure/Isomorphy

Isomorphy postulates that beneath the diversity of content among all forms of life there are identical structures and organizing processes (Mendell, 1981; Swogger, 1981). Therefore, intervention at the intrapsychic level, or the interpersonal level, or the group level will have an effect on the other two levels.

GST CONCEPTS APPLIED TO A GESTALT THERAPY GROUP

The GST concepts that have been described will be applied to a Gestalt Therapy group. The application of the GST concepts to a Gestalt Therapy group will demonstrate how the concepts may be perceived during a group therapy session. The Gestalt Therapy group is utilizing the "hot seat" technique (Yalom, 1985, p. 450). There are six group members, including the leader, and the group has had four previous therapy sessions.

Emotion-Cognition

Gestalt Therapy is an experiential therapy (Corey, 1981; Yalom, 1985). The therapy sessions allow holons to bring past problem situations into the present by reenacting the situations as if they were occurring now. A basic goal, which underlies all other goals of therapy, is the holon's attainment of awareness. Awareness, for the holon, is the process of his/her recognizing what he/she is thinking about

and what he/she is feeling, sensing, and doing. The holon's awareness, in and of itself, may be conceptualized as a curative factor. In therapy, holons are encouraged to identify the unfinished business from their past which is interfering with their present functioning. Once holons acquire present-centered awareness and a clearer perception of blocks and conflicts, they can then begin to move toward autonomy by dealing with the unfinished business from their past. By reexperiencing past conflicts as if they were occurring in the present, holons expand their levels of awareness and are able to face, recognize, and integrate denied and fragmented parts of themselves -- thus, they become unified and whole.

During the session, the therapist uses a wide range of action-oriented techniques designed to intensify the feelings and experiences of the holon on the hot seat. The other group members observe this interaction. While observing, the group members may experience an emotional-cognitive process associated with an unfinished situation in their own life, or they may identify very strongly with the holon on the hot seat. Emotion and cognition are at the heart of Gestalt Therapy.

Energy

When the therapist and volunteer holon on the hot seat work together they are not in a dyadic relationship per se.

They affect and are affected by the presence of the other holons in the group. Gruen (1981) and Kraft (1981) both discuss the individual holon's energy potential that he/she brings to group therapy. Gruen (191) says the leader, or therapist, is the catalyst in the group who initiates, or triggers the flow of energy. Because this is the group's fifth therapy session, and assuming the group has made therapeutic progress, an energy flow for the group may be depicted as in Figure 8.

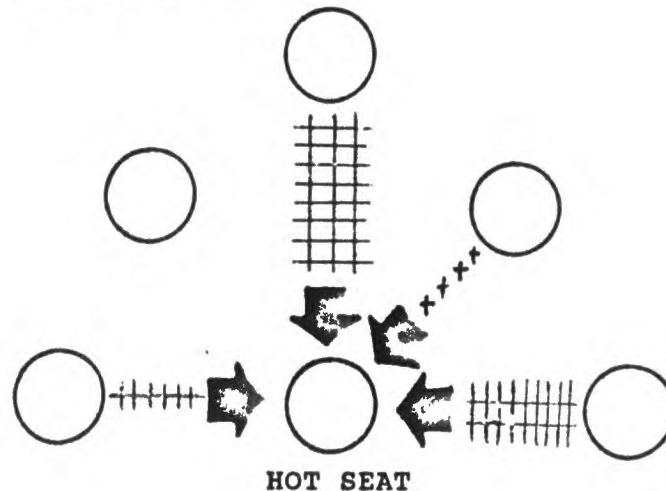


Figure 8: GROUP MEMBERS EMITTING ENERGY

However, as the holon on the hot seat works, he or she also emits energy. Depending on the perceptions of the holons in the group regarding the work in progress, and depending on their identification with the holon on the hot seat, the energy being emitted in the group can also be shown to flow as in Figure 9.

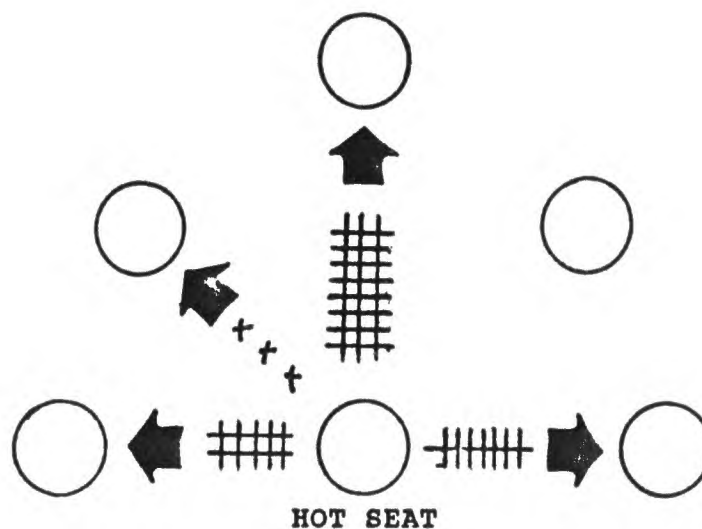


Figure 9: AN INDIVIDUAL GROUP MEMBER EMITTING ENERGY

During the therapy session, the energy level fluctuates between low and high. Figure 8 could be psychic energy (Gruen, 1981) which is needed to provide a nurturant bed in order for the holon to begin transformation. Or, Figure 9 could represent emotional energy (Kraft, 1981). The holon on the hot seat will emit emotional energy while he or she is working. How other holons in the group identify with and interpret the emotional energy emitted by the holon on the hot seat is dependent upon their own experiences and feelings. The point -- there is energy in the group and it is important that it be utilized.

Boundary

When all the individual holons have gathered, the group holon is formed. The group holon boundary is the room where the group meets. Since all the holons in the group are present, it is assumed that each is totally present. However, this is not so. In reality the group holon is best described as in Figure 10.

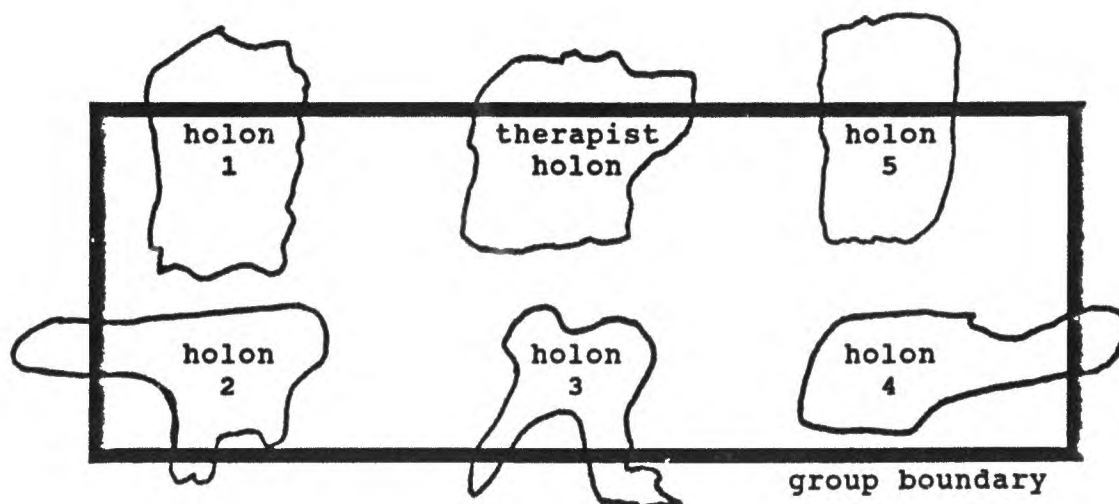


Figure 10: GROUP HOLON IN REALITY

(Concept has been adapted from Living Groups by J. E. Durkin, 1981, p. 135. Copyright 1981 1981 by J. E. Durkin. This and other citations from source adapted by permission.)

Because each individual holon is both a part and a whole and a multi-complex organism, he or she can never be totally present. J. E. Durkin (1981c) used a foam rubber ring to

illustrate a group's boundary and to identify the holons who were in and those who were not in the group. The holons outside the foam rubber ring (group boundary) were considered to be excluded as long as they remained outside the ring (boundary). But this is not so. The mere crossing of a descriptive boundary by a holon does not exclude that holon from a larger holon. He/she is still a holon in the larger group holon, affecting and being affected by all the other holons in the group simply because he/she is present. At the time he/she is outside the ring (boundary), he/she is thought of as a less-active holon as compared to a holon inside the ring who is considered to be a more-active holon. But, in order to illustrate concepts and for the sake of clarity, the group holon will be represented as in Figure 11.

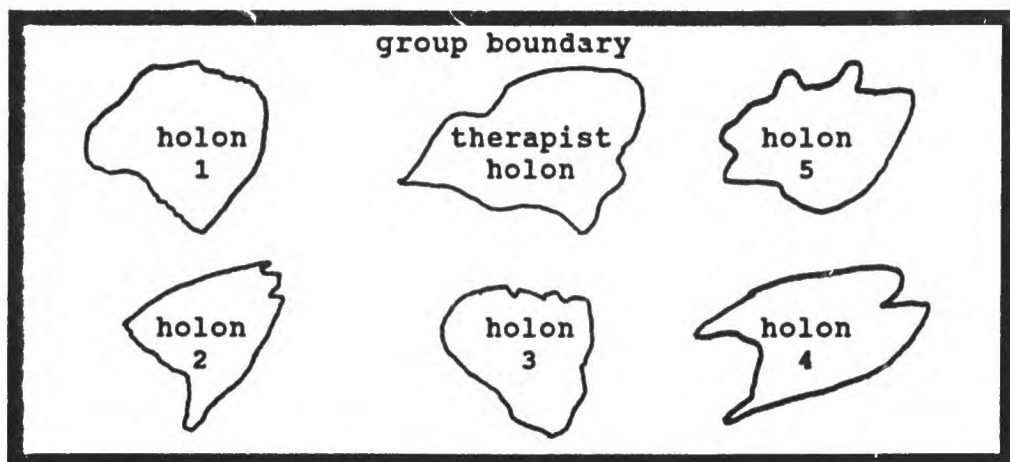


Figure 11: AN ILLUSTRATION OF A GROUP HOLON

(Concept has been adapted from
Living Groups, p. 135.)

The therapy session begins with a volunteer holon taking the hot seat. The therapist and holon start by summing, or exchanging information across closed boundaries. The summing process is shown in Figure 12.

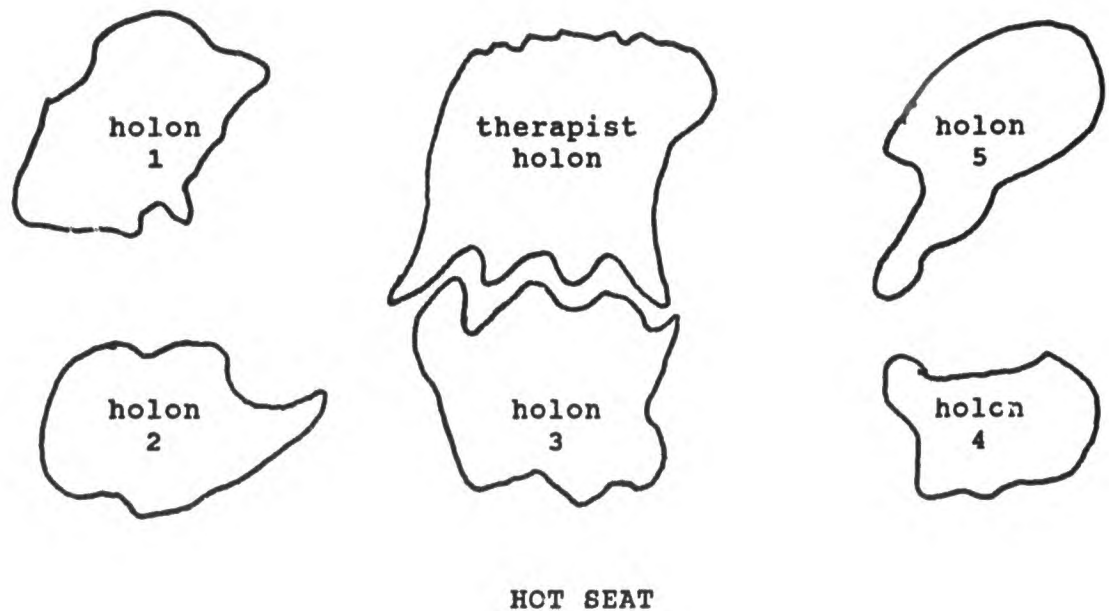


Figure 12: SUMMING

(Concept has been adapted from
Living Groups, p. 135.)

Summing continues across closed boundaries until the holon opens his/her boundary and allows for an emotional exchange to flow between the two holons -- systeming is in progress and is shown in Figure 13.

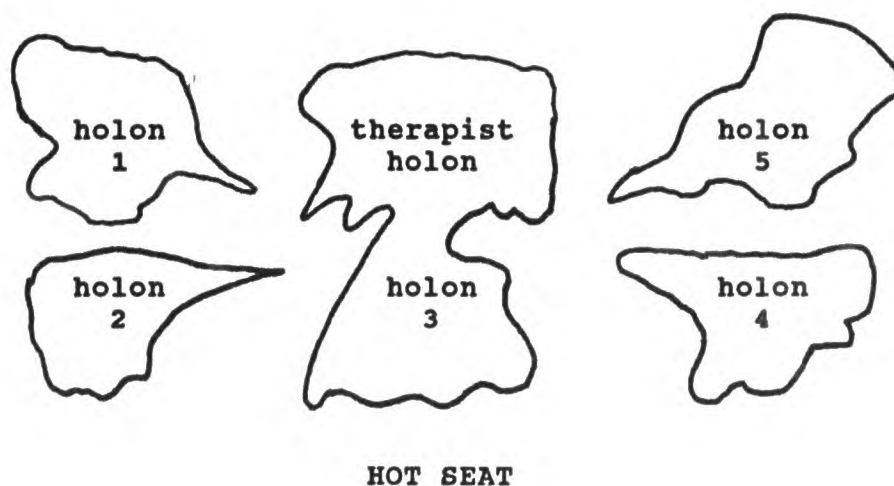


Figure 13: SYSTEMING

(Concept has been adapted from Living Groups, p. 135.)

Systeming lasts only a short time because of its highly intense nature. After systeming, boundaries are closed and summing is resumed. It may be noted in Figure 13 that when systeming occurs, other holons in the group may move their boundaries closer to the holon on the hot seat because of their involvement in the emotional-cognitive processes. As the therapy session moves toward closure and holons in the group are asked for reactions or feedback, summing is what generally takes place. However, it is not unusual for systeming to occur between holons which is graphically depicted in Figure 14 as the therapy session ends.

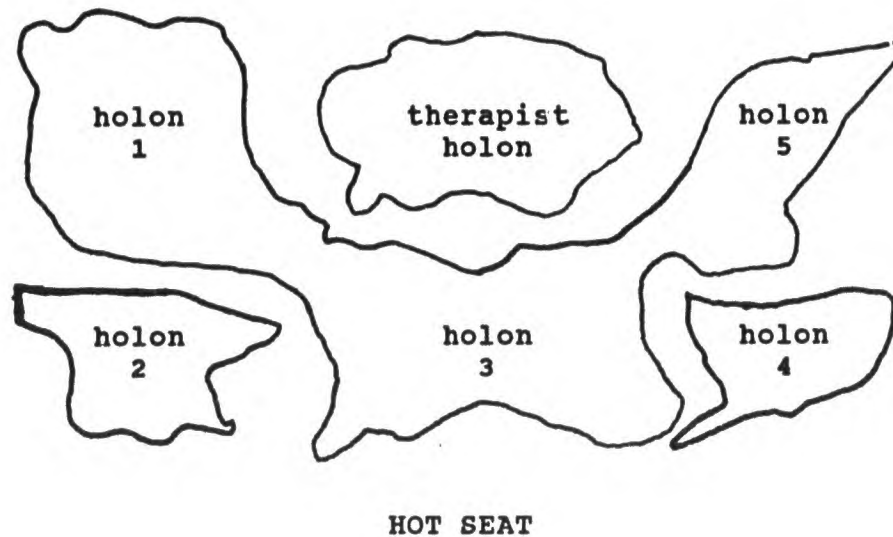


Figure 14: SUMMING AND SYSTEMING AMONG HOLONS

(Concept has been adapted from
Living Groups, p. 135.)

CONCLUSION

General System Theory (GST) concepts appear to be applicable in explaining some of the phenomena that occur in a Gestalt Therapy group. However, research is needed to support this assumption. GST may not be a group theory per se. Instead, GST may be a theory about groups. A meta-theory where its value and usefulness is found in the theory's ability for describing phenomena common to all group theories. Nevertheless, GST certainly acknowledges:

- the individual as a multi-system person, not just a single entity.
- the therapist as the most important person in the group; a dominant force, a catalyst.

- the emotional-cognitive process as a system, as one.
- the presence of energy in the group, at all levels.
- the importance of the boundary concept.
- the importance of the boundary functions, systeming and summing, and that emotional exchanges are not long lasting.
- there are various levels for intervention within a group -- intrapsychic, interpersonal, and group -- and intervention can occur at any level.
- the unique advantages of the therapist "thinking systems" -- with the focus on process instead of content thinking.

The interactions within a therapeutic group are complex. GST thinking is new and highly complex. Attempting to transpose one theory to another is complex. With all the newness and all the complexities, I leave you with this:

I am left with this uncomfortable thought that what I have been working out for myself in this paper may have little relationship to your interest and your work. If so, I regret it.

Carl Rogers (1961, p. 61)

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