Narrative Formation and Gestalt Closure: Helping Clients Make Sense of “Disequilibrium” Through Stories in the Therapeutic Setting

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There is an important link between Gestalt theory and the narrative theory. Gestalt theorists (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951; Latner, 1973) describe how individuals are constantly engaged in an ongoing process of losing and then reestablishing organismic equilibrium. In a parallel way, narrative theorists (Labov, 1982; Bruner, 1990; Linde, 1993) describe how we tell stories about troubling events in our everyday experience in order to regain some sense of equilibrium in our lives. The important shared concept at the heart of both Gestalt theory and narrative theory is that we are constantly addressing and attempting to make sense of “disequilibrium” in our experience.

In this article I will make visible how individuals work to reestablish a sense of equilibrium in their lives through the stories they tell. I will also show how these efforts parallel what Gestalt theorists have described as the process of Gestalt formation and closure. Through this analysis, I hope to show how a working knowledge and awareness of narrative theory can help Gestalt practitioners in their work with clients in the therapeutic context.

In Part One of this article, I present a case example in the form of a transcript of therapeutic work between Dr. Violet Oaklander (“Dr. O” hereafter) and a 14-year-old girl named Elisa. In Part Two, I elaborate on the theoretical links between Gestalt therapy theory and narrative theory before analyzing, in Part Three, the exchange between Dr. O and...

Elisa. In Part Four, I outline implications of this study for Gestalt practitioners.

Part One: A Case Example

In this section, I present a transcript from a therapeutic demonstration that took place during a 1997 summer training given by Dr. O on the “Gestalt therapy approach with children” (Oaklander, workshop materials, 1997). In the transcript Dr. O is working with Elisa, a “child guest” in the workshop who had also been in therapy with Dr. O over the previous year. A significant issue for Elisa at that time in her life had been the separation from her two brothers, Matthew and Jason, both of whom were being held in juvenile detention centers. (All names and identifying information in the transcript have been changed for purposes of privacy and confidentiality.)

The 24-minute demonstration in the workshop between Dr. O and Elisa was meant to show participants how Dr. O worked with children in the therapeutic context. Dr. O and Elisa both sat on the floor in front of the 25 workshop participants. While working with Dr. O, Elisa used pastels and large sheets of paper that were spread out on the floor to draw. In the transcript presented below, italics are used to denote words that were spoken with emphasis, and hyphens are used to denote a brief pause in speech. Additional descriptive information, when necessary, is provided in parentheses.

Transcript of Dr. O and Elisa

Dr. O: Because you’ve mentioned your brothers, Matthew and Jason, I’d like you to maybe draw a picture of that feeling you have missing them. You know, like colors, lines, and shapes....

Elisa: Okay—With Jason....

Dr. O: You know, how you feel about not having your brothers around anymore....

Elisa: With Jason, I lived with him longer and so—it feels like sometimes, when you’re just sitting there....

Dr. O: Hm, mmm.

Elisa: ...There’s just like this really big, dark tunnel. I never really told anybody before, but there’s a big chunk missing. Because Jason had, he was a lot of me. People don’t really understand sometimes why I miss him that much. But in life he was—he was a really big part of me. It was like, he was part of me and, when he’d leave, I kinda—fall down. Like if I was like a table? He’d be one of the legs....
narrative theory address this centrally important three-part process involving disequilibrium. In Part Three, I then use these theoretical frameworks to analyze the transcript provided above from the work of Dr. O with Elisa.

The Triadic Process in Gestalt Therapy

Perls (1947) makes it clear that the concept of “disequilibrium” is at the core of Gestalt theory by stating: “The organism is striving for the maintenance of an equilibrium which is continuously disturbed by its needs and regained through their gratification” (p. 7). Perls et al. (1951) describe this ongoing process as including the “destruction of previous partial equivalia, and the assimilation of something new” (p. 373). The constantly revisited process of establishing equilibrium, losing equilibrium, and establishing a modified equilibrium is, in the view of Gestalt therapy theorists, nothing less than the healthy ongoing process of being alive.

Latner (1973) describes an individual in need of water as an example of the creation of a need—or Gestalt formation—and the destruction of a partial equivalia. When the individual finds water, there is Gestalt closure—the fulfilling of a need and the organismic assimilation of something new. The individual is able to move on and address his or her next need as it arises. Latner argues that the process of being alive is the process of addressing needs and being changed by these encounters with the environment as one does so. In other words, one is constantly moving through the process of equilibrium, disequilibrium, and modified equilibrium as one grows and changes.

In Table 1, the Gestalt theorists discussed in this section are listed in the left-hand column. Across the horizontal rows, their particular de-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theorist</th>
<th>Equilibrium</th>
<th>Disequilibrium</th>
<th>Modified Equilibrium</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perls (1947)</td>
<td>“equilibrium”</td>
<td>“disturbed” equilibrium</td>
<td>“regained” equilibrium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perls et al. (1951)</td>
<td>“attempt of the organism to remain as it has been”</td>
<td>“destruction of previous partial equivalia”</td>
<td>“assimilation of something new”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latner (1973)</td>
<td>“organism striving to regulate itself”</td>
<td>“organismic imbalance will occur”</td>
<td>“organism rebalances itself”</td>
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scriptions of the "triadic" process of moving through equilibrium, disequilibrium, and modified equilibrium are listed.

The Triadic Process in Narrative Theory

Narrative is a universal, verbal, and nonverbal phenomena found in most, if not all, cultures across time and place (Heath, 1986; Goodwin, 1990; Ervin-Tripp and Küntay, 1996). Narrative appears in many forms including myth, history, cinema, comic book, and news item (Barthes, 1988) and has been defined in many different ways from varying theoretical perspectives (Spence, 1982; Ricouer, 1985; Leitch, 1986). For the purposes of this paper, the definition of narrative provided by Scholes (1982) will be used. In this definition, narration "rests upon the presence of a narrator or narrative medium (actors, books, film, etc.) and the absence of the events narrated" (p. 58). Thus, with narrative there is always a "teller" and "told."

Regarding the form of a story, narrative theorists have in the great majority agreed upon at least three consistent elements that make up a narrative. Whether such stories are written for the dramatic stage, told to children in fairy tales, or spoken to a counselor in the therapeutically context, stories contain the same elements of triadic structure as described by Gestalt theorists above. That is, stories tend to include a "scene setting" description of some kind of normative reality (i.e. equilibrium), a description of a "troubling" breach of those norms (i.e. disequilibrium), and some effort at "sense-making," wherein a new understanding of reality is constructed (i.e. modified equilibrium).

In the Poetics (Aristotle, trans. by Janko, 1987), Aristotle highlighted these three essential elements of tragedy, describing not only the natural human act of "representing" reality in narrative form, but also the common act of portraying both "complication" and "resolution" as a necessary part of dramatic structure. Using slightly different terms than Aristotle in his seminal work on the analysis of Russian folk tales, Propp (1968) also identified a similar three-part structure of folk narratives nested among other narrative elements. Beginning with a description of a protagonist's "initial state," these folktales next invariably described some "villainy" or "lack," that is the focus of the resolution in the denouement of the story.

It is interesting to note that both Gestalt therapy theory and Propp's narrative analysis of folktales describe a central role for an unmet need or a "lack" that must be fulfilled in some way for there to be some kind of resolution. In the same way that Latner (1973) used the example of an individual in need of water to describe the process of Gestalt formation, the protagonists represented in Russian folktales are also propelled by a need that must be met. Russian folktales about kidnapping, drag-
Although Labov identifies six elements of a narrative, an essential three-part structure of narrative similar to that described by Bruner and others above provides the foundation for his analysis: The "orientational" aspects of a narrative describe some kind of "equilibrium"; the "complicating actions" describe the "disequilibrium" or "trouble" at the heart of the narrative; and the narrative elements of both "resolution" and "evaluation" are used to come to some degree of "closure" and make sense of that troubling experience.

The narrative theorists discussed in this section and their descriptions of the triadic aspects of narrative are detailed in Table 2.

Summary of Part Two

In Part Two, I have drawn connections between narrative theory and Gestalt therapy theory. I have described how both Gestalt and narrative theories have identified a similar three-part process that includes movement through "equilibrium," "disequilibrium," and "modified equilibrium." The essential conceptual bridge that is articulated in both narrative theory and Gestalt therapy theory is that "disequilibrium" is an integral part of human experience. This disequilibrium comes as a result of being in constant negotiation with, as Perls et al. (1951) describe, a constantly "novel environment" in which we must work to get our needs met. As Bruner (1990) has argued, the process of addressing those experiences that do not meet our expectations is a primary human need that is, in part, worked out through the construction of narratives.

In Part Three, I present an analysis of the narrative data provided above to show how Elisa used a story about her own life to make sense of "disequilibrium" that she had experienced. Furthermore, I make visible the way in which Dr. O, as a skillful Gestalt therapist, helps to facilitate and "co-construct" this process of narrative formation and Gestalt closure.

Part Three: Narrative Analysis of Elisa's Story

In the following paragraphs, the three-part structure of Elisa's narrative—that is, "equilibrium," "disequilibrium," and "modified equilibrium"—will be made visible using the frames of narrative analysis discussed thus far in this paper. Dr. O's role in the collaborative construction of Elisa's sense-making narrative will also be made visible. As Capps and Ochs (1995) state, "Co-participants . . . contribute information that is critical to interpreting the significance of the events under consideration" (p. 117). Such co-construction of narratives is especially relevant in regard to the counseling context for those professionals wishing to help clients "make sense" of difficulties they have faced.

Narrative "Equilibrium"

In the transcript presented in Part One above, Elisa opens with a statement about her older brother Jason: "With Jason, I lived with him longer." Elisa then elaborates on this statement by describing what had been "normative" (Bruner, 1990) in her young life with a series of phrases that captures the importance of her brother's presence:

- "He was a lot of me."
- "He was a really big part of me."
- "He was part of me."
- "My life depended on . . . him."
- "He was lot of me."

Elisa highlights these references to the norms that once existed in her life by use of repetition—"he was a lot of me"—and by emphatic stress—"he was a really big part of me." She next uses a series of graphic images to highlight the pain she felt losing her brothers and having her "norms" disrupted.

Narrative "Disequilibrium"

Tannen (1989) states that instances of repetition in a story "underline a key phrase or idea" that the narrator is emphasizing. In Elisa's case, repetition of the idea that "something is missing" underlines the disequilibrium that she has experienced in the process of losing her brothers. To emphasize her feelings of missing her brother Jason, Elisa uses multiple metaphors in her first lengthy passage to portray her troubling feelings in clear images:

- "There's this really big, dark . . . tunnel."
- "There's a big chunk missing."
- "When he'd leave I'd kinda fall down."
- "If I was a table, he'd be one of the legs and he'd go and I'd be sitting there . . . going all crooked."

Capps and Ochs (1995) note that storytellers emphasize their meaning within a spoken text through the use of "intensifying" adverbs and adjectives as in Elisa's emphasis placed on her descriptions of trouble through her repeated use of "really" (e.g., "really big, dark . . . tunnel," "he was a really big part of me," "it'd be really hard to live my life without . . .")
Thus, through both repetition and emphasis, Elisa makes clear that losing her brothers was a significantly troubling event in her young life. In Gestalt terminology, Elisa brings into “figure” a verbal portrait that clearly articulates her foregrounded disequilibrium. By having encouraged Elisa to express herself through the images of “colors, lines and shapes,” Dr. O can be seen as facilitating both narrative construction as well as Gestalt formation with her client: “The figure (Gestalt) in awareness,” state Perls et al. (1951), “is a clear, vivid perception, image, or insight” (p. 231). What Elisa has done thus far through her image-laden words is to articulate a “vivid perception” of the trouble in her story which she next works to make sense of in collaboration with Dr. O.

**Narrative “Modified Equilibrium”**

Elisa’s story about missing her brothers in the transcript is not over once she has described the images that so clearly articulate the “disequilibrium” that losing her brothers has caused her. Instead, Elisa moves quickly into the “sense making” part of her story with the use of what Labov and Fanshel (1977) has identified as the evaluative conjunction “so,” (i.e., “for that reason, therefore”). Elisa repeats the use of “so” four separate times within three sentences, thereby highlighting the point she wants to make in summing up this story of loss:

- “So when I think about him, he’s like—”
- “So he’s—going up and I’m staying down.”
- “So he’s kinda like living his life—he keeps going, but I’m still down here trying to figure out what to do, so.”

In these lines, Elisa’s grammatical use of present progressive verb forms (“I’m staying down,” “he keeps going,” “I’m still down here trying”) describe her perception of a continuing action or a state of being that is still in progress. Thus, in both aspect and tense, Elisa is highlighting a residual negative effect of her brothers leaving, an effect that still affects her. Her repeated use of directional adverbs (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), which put her in a “down” position, also emphasize this ongoing negative state: “He’s going up, and I’m staying down,” “he keeps going, but I’m still down here.” Together, these evaluative adjectives and adverbs are used by Elisa to cast her present state as one of being idled, stuck, and unchanging since her brothers left.

Importantly, Dr. O—in her “co-constructive” role in eliciting and helping to make sense of Elisa’s narrative—does not allow Elisa to end the story after Elisa concludes in line 24: “So he’s kinda like living his...” Dr. O may ask questions, encourage elaboration, or provide interpretive feedback to facilitate Elisa’s narrative construction.

In considering this question about the “here and now,” Elisa surprisingly reevaluates and makes sense of her story in a way that almost diametrically opposes her first set of evaluative statements described above. In responding to Dr. O’s question, Elisa again introduces the evaluative marker “so” and again employs repetition (e.g., “used to”) to make a second series of evaluative comments to describe that she has in fact changed, in some ways for the better, in the absence of her brothers:

- “So, I’ve gotten used to—sort of being on my own.”
- “I’ve gotten used to making decisions.”
- “So if he did come back, I’d get used to—having him there. But I don’t think I’d be so much with him anymore.”
- “So… I live my life on my own, with having—Justin there.”

In this second set of evaluative comments, Elisa gives a “particular evaluative hue” (Capps and Ochs, 1989) to herself in the narrative as someone who has not only been changed by her experience, but also grown from it. With the use of present perfect verb forms, Elisa describes a process that was started in the past but has been completed by this present time: “I’ve gotten used to—sort of being on my own.” “I’ve gotten used to making decisions.” These statements stand in stark contrast to her use of the present progressive verb forms in her first attempt at evaluation: “I’m staying down,” “I’m still down here trying to figure out what to do.”

Moreover, Elisa’s use of the phrase “I’ve gotten used to” signals that she has developed through habit or custom a “new norm” in her life since her brothers have left. Such habitation signals not only a kind of “modified equilibrium” that was described by narrative theorists above, but also a kind of “regained equilibrium” that was described by the Gestalt theorists as well. To highlight this change of state, Elisa closes this second series of evaluative comments by again returning to the use of the present tense to describe her present state, in spite of not having her brother with her:

“I’ve had to learn a lot of where—I live my life on my own, without having—Justin there.”

Peterson and McCabe (1983) discuss how tellers of a story achieve a kind of “closure” after they have addressed the trouble that
“such later events resolve the high point action in some sense, clearing
the stage or capping off the experience” (p. 31). Reflecting this notion
of resolution, Elisa ends the transcript with a statement that works to
resolve or, in Gestalt terminology, bring closure to the conflicts she has
been describing. Additionally, it can be argued from the Gestalt per-
spective that such phrasing is evidence of what Perls et al. (1951) have
described as “the destruction of previous equilibria, and the assimila-
tion of something new” (p. 373). At the end of the transcript, Elisa
presents herself not simply as “down” about losing her brothers, but as
someone who has incorporated that difficult loss into a larger perspec-
tive of herself, gaining some closure on it in the process.

It is important to highlight the fact that this example of narrative
formation and Gestalt closure was not accomplished by Elisa in isolation,
but within the particular context of a therapeutic relationship estab-
lished over time with Dr. O. Thus, Elisa’s sense making can be seen
as being both verbally and nonverbally “co-constructed” with the able
assistance of a caring adult in the form Dr. O. In the following section,
I discuss the implications of this study.

Part Four: Stories Are Not Just “Stories”

This study has important implications for Gestalt therapy practitioners,
especially in relation to working therapeutically with children. First,
the theoretical linkages that exist between Gestalt theory and narrative
theory can be used by Gestalt therapists to inform the moment-to-
moment verbal interactions between the therapist and the client in the
context of therapy in the Gestalt tradition.

Specifically, this study asserts the need to pay close attention to the
role that words—and particularly narratives—play in the process of
Gestalt formation and closure. Narratives, I have argued, carry with
them powerful constellated images of troubling experience that the
client is attempting to work through in the “sense-making” process of
talk. Moreover, the formation of a complete narrative—that is, one
containing each of the three elements of “equilibrium,” “disequilibrium,”
and “modified equilibrium”—enables the client to fully “bring into
figure” not only images, but also feelings, responses, thoughts and eval-
uations of their experience. In this way, narrative formation can be seen
as related to the process of Gestalt closure in that both processes in-
volve “the assimilation of something new” (Perls et al., 1951).

This study also raises important implications regarding the interac-
tions of adults and children in the therapeutic context. For example,
from a developmental perspective, children’s narratives need to be
understood by adult therapists as more than just a child “telling sto-

There is compelling evidence to indicate that narrative compre-
prehension is among the earliest powers of mind to appear in the
young child and among the most widely used forms of organiz-
ing human experience. [p. 75].

Furthermore, as the data in this study demonstrate, Dr. Oaklander
had a vital role in helping Elisa to better “organize her experience”
through story in their work together. Specifically, Dr. Oaklander helped
Elisa to move through a process of narrative formation and Gestalt clo-
sure in two important ways. First, Dr. Oaklander prompted Elisa to tell
her story (“I’d like you to maybe draw a picture of that feeling you
have missing them”) in a way that helped Elisa fully bring into figure
the trouble she was facing. Importantly, this prompt included the non-
verbal use of drawn images to facilitate the child’s storytelling. Sec-
ond, Dr. Oaklander helped Elisa to “reevaluate” the story she told by
bringing her more fully into the present (“If he were here, how would
it be different for you?”). In this way, Elisa was able to see that she had
changed over time and that her old version of the story, her old at-
tempts at “closure,” no longer fit her present life. Through these ex-
amples, it is clear that therapists who work out of a Gestalt orientation
can act in important ways not only to facilitate the process of narrative
formation, but also of Gestalt closure.

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Hats off to Peter Mortola for bringing specific ways in which narrative theory connects to Gestalt therapy. Many practitioners who have written about and practiced narrative therapy have profoundly influenced the therapeutic field. However, the flotsam and jetsam of trendiness float through the narrative approach, leaving fuzziness and confusion about exactly how one would have a clear narrative lens. For example, the words postmodern, social constructionism, poststructuralism, languaging, and the like are often bandied about in ways that have restricted narrative therapy to abstractions. Mortola has not only brought clarity by looking at a session with an eye to narrative theory, but he has also heightened our awareness of the marvelous contribution of Labov and others in their research on human conversation.

I would like to briefly continue Mortola's attempt at bridging the two approaches by first describing a few additional shared intentions of both narrative theory and Gestalt therapy theory. I will then describe two additional bridges, and finally, I will articulate one major distinction.

Prior to beginning, I would like to highlight one cornerstone of narrative work: change comes about by a shift in the narrative (or the story) told by the client. Carlos Sluzki (1992) argued that the most important element in bringing about change is "the ability of one or more family members to describe current problems as emanating from (or embedded in) interpersonal, relational or systemic issues" (pp. 217–230). What he and other narrative therapists refer to as the "dominant story" is often that a problem is described as existing solely inside of self or in another person. Narrative therapists are interested in getting the story to shift in the way Sluzki describes. They call it "re-storying" or "re-authoring," which is shifting the interpretation of the life-organizing

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