

Theory and Praxis in Experiential Education: Some Insights From Gestalt Therapy

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Abstract

Background: Higher education policy increasingly conceptualizes industry-linked, service, and place-based forms of education in terms of experiential education. Although potentially promising, this turn toward experience risks instrumentalizing and marketizing experience, which is exacerbated by individualized theories of experiential learning. **Purpose:** Some scholars have therefore called for more sociological accounts of experiential learning, inviting deeper consideration of how individual experience is connected to social, cultural, or environmental factors. **Methodology/Approach:** This article responds to that call by explicating the praxis of Gestalt therapy, often associated with the individualistic human potential movement, but which nevertheless offers a framework for reconceptualizing theory and pedagogy of experiential education in more sociological terms. A brief history of Gestalt therapy foregrounding its sociological and experiential basis is followed by explanation of the three pillars of Gestalt therapy (commitment to dialogue, phenomenology, and field theory). **Findings/Conclusions:** This framework is shown to support a more sociologically oriented theory and praxis of experiential education that also integrates divergent understandings of experience. **Implications:** Given the turn toward experience in higher education and contemporary flourishing of cooperative social processes in general, defining experiential education more explicitly in terms of Gestalt praxis promises a timely enhancement of both, in the service of socially responsible objectives.

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Although experiential education has historically been associated with various forms of outdoor and expeditionary education, higher education policy increasingly draws upon concepts associated with this field to rationalize industry-linked, project, service, cooperative, and place-based education, as well as endeavors to enhance overall “student experience” (McRae & Johnston, 2016). Although this turn toward experience is potentially promising, it entails a risk that experience will become an instrumental and marketized means to achieve ends of economic efficiency, resulting in what Roberts (2008) terms neo-experiential education. This risk is exacerbated by the prevalence of theories of experiential learning which are largely individualist and psychologized, despite a practical emphasis among experiential educators on embodied processes and social contexts (Bell, 1993; Quay, 2003; Seaman et al., 2017; Seaman & Rheingold, 2013). Explanations of learning as a cognitive and disembodied process that is “essentially Cartesian” (Seaman & Rheingold, 2013, p. 158) thus abstract and separate learning from the corporeal context in which it occurs. Furthermore, the purpose of the learning is too often yoked to individualist ideologies that foreground self-actualization and empowerment (Bell, 1993; Seaman et al., 2017), at the risk of overlooking questions of social justice (Roberts, 2008; Warren, 2002). Seaman et al. have therefore called for more sociological accounts of experiential learning, inviting deeper consideration of the ways in which psychological or personal experience is connected to social, cultural, or environmental factors.

In an attempt to historicize this need, Seaman argues that experiential education theorists draw too uncritically from the human potential movement’s focus on self-actualization, particularly Abraham Maslow’s understanding of experiential education as a change process grounded in making a person “aware of what is going on inside himself” (Maslow, as cited in Seaman, 2016, p. 3). Given the explicit or implicit debt of much experiential learning theory to the human potential movement, particularly through the work of David Kolb (Seaman, 2016; Seaman et al., 2017), this hypothesis is not unreasonable. An alternative explanation for the problem, however, might interpret the field’s bias toward cognitive and psychologized concepts as a reflection of the continued ubiquity of Cartesian thinking in many research cultures, including (or perhaps especially) within the fields of education and psychology. As Bell (1993) argues, theory often functions as an extension of Cartesian philosophy, in which “[a]bstract thinking is privileged over embodied knowing” (p. 20) and in this scenario, the psychologized individualism of much experiential learning theory is perhaps not *only* a manifestation of ideology associated with the human potential movement; it is an expression of far-reaching and entrenched preferences embedded in Western traditions of thinking and research.

Challenging the psychologism of experiential education theory may not, therefore, be simply a matter of reducing the influence of the human potential movement

within this field. Indeed, it is worth noting that humanistic psychology (including the tributary of the human potential movement) was just one expression of a sustained counter-cultural lineage in Western thought that can be traced from 18th-century Romanticism through 19- and 20-century existentialist philosophy, to 20th-century feminism, environmentalism, and poststructuralism (to name just a few widely recognized iterations), which has challenged Cartesianism. This counter-cultural tradition has always offered a correction of dualistic thought which emphasizes holism and relationality in contrast to the disconnecting tendencies of partition and atomization. Although it has undoubtedly retained an individualistic slant through its foregrounding of (often critical) questions about human subjectivity, its insistence on the alienating effects of Cartesianism as well as its holistic attention to relational connections has also offered a more sociological perspective that views individual experience as interactionally shaped by societies, cultures, and environments. Viewed in this way, contradictions within the human potential movement *and* experiential learning theory might be appraised compassionately, as expressing the difficulty of manifesting a critical or counter-cultural practice from within the very context that is being questioned. Furthermore, the struggle within these fields to reconcile Cartesian theoretical frameworks with a counter-cultural philosophy that emphasizes community, embodiment, and connection demonstrates what the feminist philosopher Haraway (1987) describes as an affective, contingent, engaged, situated—and messy—approach to the task of theorizing.

Haraway's is an approach that will be familiar to many experiential educators, who are accustomed to theorizing in similar ways. Yet, by abstracting this process, she arguably compromises the very situatedness that she names, a difficulty that Seaman and Rheingold (2013) explore when they observe that cognitive processes "will always be constituted by social relations and cultural artefacts" (p. 159). Their solution to this difficulty is to document and analyze examples of reflection in practice, to track how cognitive processes are interlaced with embodied and social experience, and they conclude that more research of this type is likely to support a theory of "how abstraction is socially accomplished and mediated" (p. 170). It would certainly be useful to develop new formulations of how experiential learning occurs, but as Quay (2003) has suggested it may also be useful to reflect on existing theories "that could be described as close cousins of experiential education" (pp. 110–111). This article therefore revisits a site of philosophy, theory and practice (or praxis) that is often associated with the human potential movement and humanistic psychology more generally, but which may yet offer a valuable framework for understanding the ways in which cognitive and embodied processes intersect. That site is Gestalt therapy.

The Sociological Origins of Gestalt Therapy

Seaman et al. (2017) highlight the indebtedness of the human potential movement to Basic Skills Training Groups (later, simply T-groups) research, which was pioneered by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the late 1940s. Their argument recounts the erosion of Lewin's earlier sociological approach in favor of a more psychologized

approach that flourished in the 1950s, an evolution documented by Lewin's collaborator Ken Benne in his 1964 history of T-group research. Overall, Seaman et al. argue that Lewin's work "helped facilitate the rise of self-awareness programs in the 1960s, providing the template for encounter groups, Gestalt sessions, marathon groups, and wilderness-based personal growth programs" (p. NP7). This narrative's specific association of Gestalt therapy with other manifestations of the human potential movement is logical in the sense that Frederick "Fritz" Perls, a key founder of Gestalt therapy, became a celebrity at Esalen (the stronghold of the human potential movement at Big Sur, California) in the 1960s, running workshops that showcased psychotherapeutic techniques he had developed in New York in the 1950s.

However, correlating Gestalt therapy with the human potential movement misses the ways in which it was—like Lewin's work—an important precursor of it. The work undertaken by the pioneers of Gestalt therapy in New York in the late 1940s—which Perls then exported to other parts of the United States (notably California) from the 1950s—paralleled the work undertaken by Lewin's team, with both strands eventually converging at Esalen in the 1960s (Fisher, 2017; Stoehr, 1994). Despite their separate articulation, the approaches developed by Lewin and Perls were similarly indebted to Gestalt psychology as it was developed in Germany in the early 20th century. The German word "Gestalt" was coined in 1890 by the Viennese philosopher Graf Christian von Ehrenfels, to define "a psychological whole formed by the structuring of the perceptual field" (Wulf, 1996) and this suggested an alternative to the scientific methodology of dissecting wholes into ever smaller and more discrete parts, forming the basis for Gestalt psychology, which emphasizes holistic rather than atomistic aspects of perceptual organization (Wertheimer, 2000). Before migrating to the United States, both Lewin and Fritz Perls's wife Laura were trained in Gestalt psychology, and Fritz Perls had worked as a clinic assistant with Kurt Goldstein, a Gestalt neurologist, in the 1920s.

This shared intellectual heritage can be observed most clearly in field theory, which both Lewin and the Perls elaborated following its initial conceptualization by the Gestalt psychologists. In the disciplinary contexts of psychology and sociology, field theory is generally connected with Lewin but was independently explored in *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls et al., 1951)—the seminal articulation of Gestalt therapy—which understood both "organism" and "environment" as part of an "interacting field" (p. 4). In both cases, field theory extended the Gestalt psychologists' interest in *relationships* between parts of the whole (Robine, 2015; Wertheimer, 2000), and thus signaled a more relational and sociological approach to psychology. Although like Lewin, Fritz Perls then became increasingly oriented toward individualized concerns, to equate Gestalt therapy primarily with his approach is inaccurate because, as Serlin and Shane (1999) observe,

much of what was considered Gestalt therapy—that is, the "Fritz" style of working with the "empty chair" and the like—is but one particular form . . . [T]he other two codevelopers of Gestalt therapy, Laura Perls and Paul Goodman, made equally substantial although . . . different contributions to its formulation, application, and dissemination. (p. 374)

Significantly, both Laura Perls and Goodman “were personally and professionally more devoted to connection and community involvement” (p. 375), thus exhibiting more interest in addressing social problems than Fritz Perls.

Goodman was an eclectic intellectual whose career defied easy pigeonholing—he worked variously across academic, publishing, therapeutic, and activist contexts, and his best-selling book *Growing Up Absurd* became a defining text of New Left politics in the 1960s. His scholarly expertise was also highly interdisciplinary, interweaving perspectives from philosophy, psychology, theology, sociology, political theory, educational theory, and aesthetics. Goodman was thus instrumental in articulating the range of conceptual influences that coalesced in Gestalt praxis. As his biographer observes, Goodman “did not view psychotherapy as a discipline closed off from the rest of life, just one more professionalized service industry in the planned society” (Stoehr, 1994, p. 16). Rather, his interest in the possibilities of Gestalt therapy trended always toward the more holistically conceived task of transforming not just individuals but also society and culture. His approach thus articulated mistrust of state, bureaucratic, or other top-down processes, as well as faith in the organismic capacity of human beings to self-organize for their survival, and in this, Goodman betrayed his anarchist political leanings (Stoehr, 1994).

Laura Perls was a highly trained pianist and dancer, and the only girl at the gymnasium school she attended in Germany, where she took a humanities course in classical and modern literature, Greek, Latin, and French. At the University of Frankfurt, she began studying law because she wanted to make a social contribution working with juvenile offenders, but gravitated into Gestalt psychology, completing her doctoral dissertation in this field. At graduate school, she also studied psychoanalysis and existentialist philosophy, and was a student of Martin Buber for 2 years (Serlin & Shane, 1999). Her thorough grounding in Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis, and existential philosophy thus contained most of the substantial ingredients of Gestalt therapy as it subsequently evolved. In her subsequent life and career, she was less engaged with public political movements than Goodman, but her political sensibility was nevertheless similarly grounded in her attention to community. As Serlin and Shane observe,

[c]ontact, support, stability, commitment, and rootedness were key words in the vocabulary of Laura Perls, and these principles are evident throughout her life, work, and death. Throughout her life she always valued friendship, established networks, and engaged in community involvement . . . Laura tended to focus on connection, cooperation, caring and relationship. (p. 383)

In other words, Laura Perls’s approach was that of the affective, contingent, engaged, and localized theorist. She did not write as much as Goodman or Perls—and/or her authorship was not acknowledged—and because she expended less energy on abstracting, her contribution to the development of Gestalt therapy was less visible. Nevertheless—and like so many other women in other fields—her relational and pedagogical labor vastly exceeded that of her male colleagues, since she worked for almost 40 years at the New York Institute for Gestalt Psychotherapy, training

generations of therapists. As a result of this work and in the longer term, she was arguably more influential in shaping the commitments of Gestalt therapy than her more flamboyant husband.

As this brief account of the origins of Gestalt therapy suggests, it is more grounded in sociological questions about the connection between individual and social experience than is often understood. Indeed, the ongoing usage within Gestalt therapeutic communities around the world of a unique training format which requires trainees to commit to individual therapy as well as ongoing participation in group therapy is an important way in which the practice continues to recognize and explore these connections. This approach has also supported a strong tradition of applying Gestalt therapeutic principles in organizational and community contexts, often as an expression of social responsibility; for example, through The Relational Center in Los Angeles which aims to support “neighbourhoods, communities and organisations, especially those interested in increasing citizen participation, stakeholder investment, and greater involvement in decision-making” and to cultivate “the conditions for sustainable, healthy, democratic community” (O’Shea, 2011). Thus, while it is true that Gestalt therapy took an individualist turn via Esalen and some widely publicized maxims of Fritz Perls’s such as “I do my thing and you do your thing,” its overall characterization as individualistic misrepresents its past contribution to apprehending the social and also underestimates its value for supporting socially oriented work in the present. Furthermore, since Gestalt therapy combines a sociological inclination with a unique approach to understanding *experience*, its relevance to the conceptualization of experiential education in more sociological and socially responsible terms is worth elaborating. The next part of this article therefore explores specific commitments of Gestalt therapy that support this agenda.

Experience

Roberts (2008) observes that within the field of experiential education, the concept of experience is often understood in common sense terms by “descriptors such as ‘hands-on learning,’ ‘learning by doing,’ ‘active learning,’ and learning ‘outside the four-walled classroom’” (pp. 20–21). These phrases suggest an embodied dimension that is reflected in the visibility of nature-based or expeditionary forms of education in the scholarly literature, but the concepts of experience that are typically used to theorize such activities are abstracted through “cyclic models that separate experience and reflection” (Seaman & Rheingold, 2013, p. 158). As Roberts (2008) observes, there are also three competing abstractions of experience at work in the field of experiential education: “experience as interaction, embodied experience, and experience as praxis” (p. 19). According to Roberts, the first is grounded in the pragmatist educational philosophy of John Dewey and foregrounds learning as a “shared, interactive experience” rather than an individual undertaking (p. 23). The second is grounded in existentialist phenomenology and understands experience as subjectively “‘lived’ through our individual bodies” (p. 25). The third is grounded in critical theory and sees experience as grounded in “dynamics of power and social change” (p. 27).

Roberts's taxonomy provides a useful account of the different ways in which experience can be theorized, but it also reproduces the atomizing logic of Cartesianism and does not explore how these different schemas may overlap. This is where the praxis of Gestalt therapy is particularly salient, because through its combination of philosophy, theory, and practice, it suggests how all three understandings of experience canvassed by Roberts may interact in support of experiential education. The three pillars of commitment in Gestalt therapy are dialogue, phenomenology, and field theory (Resnick, 2015), which can be roughly mapped against Roberts's view that experience can be understood as interaction (dialogue), embodied experience (phenomenology), and praxis (field theory). Although the Gestalt approach is ultimately holistic, the sections which follow explore each of these commitments in turn, with a view to identifying their value in supporting the theorization and practice of experiential education.

The Commitment to Dialogue

The commitment to dialogue in Gestalt therapy builds on the philosopher and theologian Buber's (1923/1937) focus on relationality, which he articulated in his 1923 book *I and Thou* through the claim that "[i]n the beginning is relation" (p. 18). For Buber (unlike Maslow), relationality was thus the basis of experience: "The man who experiences has no part in the world. For it is 'in him' and not between him and the world that the experience arises" (p. 5). In elaborating his ideas, Buber (1923/1937, 1929/2002) focused on what he termed the "I-Thou" relationship and its emergence through dialogue. In Buber's (1929/2002) formulation, I-Thou dialogue is not simply "speaking together"; as he argued, "[t]he life of dialogue is not limited to men's traffic with one another; it is . . . a relation of men to one another that is only represented in their traffic" (p. 9, emphasis added). He thus understood dialogue as an orientation toward "meeting" or an experience of mutuality between unique beings. Early Gestalt therapists dedicated themselves to practicing Buber's approach to dialogue, including and often especially in group contexts and with time, the relational orientation implicit in the commitment to dialogue has been increasingly foregrounded (Clarkson, 2014; Yontef, 2002), and has informed a relational turn across the entire field of psychotherapy, including psychodynamic variants derived from the work of Freud and Jung (Aron, 1996; Mitchell, 1988).

Supporting the capacity for meeting through dialogue are two other concepts proposed by Buber and elaborated by Gestalt therapists: *confirmation*—or recognition of the other's uniqueness—and *inclusion*—or the empathic capacity to imaginatively enter into the life of the other (Clarkson, 2014). The notions of confirmation and inclusion underscore that dialogue validates "the uniqueness of the individual *within* the context of the relational" (Hycner, 1995, p. 6), entailing experience of simultaneous separateness and connection. In this sense, it is a form of *emergence*, arising from a dialectical polarity; as Kempley (1974) observes, "[n]either separateness nor union is the goal . . . but rather the exhortation of the . . . undulation between them" (p. 65).

In the terminology of Gestalt therapy, a commitment to dialogue also supports the emergence of *contact* or the “experience of appreciating the ‘otherness,’ the uniqueness, and the wholeness of another, while at the same time this is reciprocated by the other” (Hycner, 1995, p. 8). Contact is thus experiential and is often described by clients as a transformative feeling of being seen and/or heard, and with therapeutic repetition of the experience, their own capacity for presence and contact—or their dialogic orientation—is experientially supported and enriched. Yet, as V. Burley (n.d.) observes, dialogue practiced along such lines is not an everyday or natural form of communication, but rather “grows out of an attitude that must be learned and practiced” (p. 67). It demands the seamless integration of theory and practice, which she compares with the art of making music:

In order to make beautiful music most people must struggle with the theory and the scales and the repetitious exercises . . . Learning the theory is the substructure of doing excellent therapy and an important part of the training required, but in order to work well, theoretical abstractions are woven in seamlessly into the experience; they do not dominate or obscure the therapist’s eye. (pp. 69–70)

As Burley suggests, the practice of dialogue as it has been developed by Gestalt therapists is a form of interaction that is certainly theorized but is ideally learned experientially, through encounters with “stewards” (Hycner, 1995, p. 11) of dialogue who have themselves learned its art through experiential repetition; in this sense, it can be situated within what Vygotsky (1978) described as “the zone of proximal development” which refers to activities that benefit from some kind of pedagogical support.

These observations about dialogic practice have important implications for experiential education, because although dialogue is often understood as a *method* that can be applied in educational contexts or alternatively as a *goal* that students can be socialized to engage in, Burley’s observations highlight that dialogue is itself an *experience* that facilitates learning about oneself and others, and which is learned through embodied practice. This is suggestive of how frameworks that separate theory and practice (or cognitive and embodied processes) might be challenged. Given that many experiential educators already use dialogue extensively, a Gestalt perspective may offer a useful theorization of what is already happening; when dialogue occurs in experiential education contexts, it is not a separate exercise in abstract reflection but can be understood holistically, as an integral component of the ongoing and social experience. Furthermore, when it is considered that, as Buber (1929/2002) claimed, an I-Thou encounter is possible with “an animal, a plant or a stone” (p. 12), staples of experiential education such as hiking or canoeing may also be understood as offering opportunities for dialogue with the natural world, thus blurring perceived boundaries between experiencing and reflecting.

Overall, the relationality of the Buberian approach provides a counterpoint to understandings of dialogue in pragmatist conceptualizations of deliberative democracy or civic education that inform theories of experiential education (Roberts, 2008), which tend to work from the assumption that dialogue involves the interaction

of separate, stable selves. In contrast, a Buberian approach, which sees interactive processes as constitutive of selves and realities, is arguably more sociologically attuned to the ways in which subjectivities are socially and environmentally shaped. This focus on the co-construction of self and reality also reveals the indebtedness of dialogic thinking to phenomenological philosophy, which Roberts posits as the basis for his second conceptualization of experience, as embodied.

Phenomenology

In the writing of Buber, the relational dimension of dialogue is explored phenomenologically, through tracking the immediate experience of encounter. Phenomenology was developed by the philosopher Edmund Husserl, notably elaborated by Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre (among others), and proceeds from attention to immediate or prereflective experience (Moran, 2002; Stewart, 1978). As suggested above, it has been particularly influential for relational thinking because as Yontef (2002) explains, “[i]n phenomenological thought, reality and perception are interactional co-constructions” (p. 16). This approach challenges the subject/object dichotomies of Cartesian thought, as exemplified by Heidegger’s hyphenated concept of “being-in-the-world” (Gergen, 2009, p. xxii).

As a method, phenomenology involves three main principles: bracketing, description, and horizontalization. Bracketing involves putting aside existing knowledge, theoretical frameworks, ideologies, or preconceptions. This is undertaken to enable faithful description (rather than interpretation) of phenomena as they arise. Horizontalization involves equal consideration of all phenomena, without imposition of a hierarchy (T. Burley & Bloom, 2008; Crocker, 2005). The utility of this methodology for tracking psychological experience has led to its embrace within the field of humanistic psychology (Waterman, 2013), and Gestalt therapy played a central role in pioneering this approach (T. Burley & Bloom, 2008; Crocker, 2005).

Because of the premium that phenomenology places on lived, subjective sensation and perception, Roberts identifies it with what he terms embodied approaches to experience, a view that is supported through Gestalt therapists’ careful attention to bodily responses. Hallmarks of Gestalt therapeutic work include descriptive attention to the “here and now” of somatic experience, through attention to the client’s bodily sensations, physical presentation, and facial movements. However, there is also a psychological inflection to phenomenological work, expressed through attention to meaning making processes. During this exploratory process, the subjective perceptions of both the client and therapist are foregrounded, and the therapist is guided by curiosity about the client while bracketing interpretative possibilities and horizontalizing the information that is emerging. As the therapy progresses, any meaning making that unfolds is checked and rechecked against the client’s present experience as well as that of the therapist, so that theorizing or interpretation remains continually grounded in phenomenological attention to experience. In group contexts, a continuously phenomenological approach is particularly important for keeping track of the various intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group processes that are simultaneously unfolding (Kepner, 1980).

As T. Burley and Bloom (2008) observe, Gestalt therapists thus “point a spotlight to a specific part of experience,” sharpening the client’s (or group’s) conscious *awareness* of particular aspects (p. 162). This supports the goals of Gestalt therapy which are “deceptively simple: first, awareness and second, cognitive, affective and behavioural adjustment” (p. 172), and this procedural approach is supported by research in neuroscience which suggests that “learning and change do not happen without awareness” (T. Burley & Bloom, 2008, p. 178). Yet despite the importance of awareness for learning and the effectiveness of the phenomenological method for sharpening awareness and preparing the ground for social action, research on the everyday educational applications of phenomenology has been scant (Quay, 2016; Greenberg et al., 2019). This is possibly because, like Buberian dialogue, a phenomenological approach “can only be learned at a deep level through engaging in the process” (Greenberg et al., 2019, p. 169), which is difficult to orchestrate in educational contexts that remain governed by mechanical “banking” metaphors (Freire, 1970/2006).

Roberts gestures toward this difficulty when he claims that a phenomenological approach “takes us away from the everyday and the typical”—referencing the prevalence of experiential education activities such as wilderness adventures, in which students transcend familiar settings (Roberts, 2008, p. 25). Furthermore, he suggests that some such embodied practices position nature as a medium that facilitates self-actualizing spiritual transcendence, leading him to characterize phenomenology overall as “highly individualized and transcendent” (p. 25). However, the cultivation of awareness through attention to the everyday “here and now” within Gestalt therapy contradicts Roberts’s claim, suggesting that it is a mistake to equate phenomenology with transcendentalism. Furthermore, Gestalt therapy suggests how phenomenology can provide a methodical entry point into the realm of experience that then supports dialogically supported learning about social and intersubjective dynamics. These insights may therefore encourage experiential educators to apply or deploy phenomenological approaches in relation to more mundane settings and sociological themes. Indeed, given the ubiquity of experience, Gestalt therapy’s attention to the commonplace suggests how greater commitment to phenomenology might position experiential education as a coherent pedagogy for a very wide range of educational objectives.

Field Theory

As briefly discussed above, field theory’s consideration of the organism in its environment is grounded in a relational and sociological logic: the organism and the environment cannot be understood apart from their relation or interaction. In Gestalt field theory, this relationship is theorized in terms of “the contact boundary,” which is where organism and environment “touch” or “meet” and is *where experience occurs* (Perls et al., 1951, p. 229). This concept is thus particularly apt for theorizing experience, perhaps especially for experiential educators who—like Gestalt therapists—specialize in working at the contact boundary.

Yet, returning to the argument of Roberts, how does Gestalt therapy's use of field theory support the view of experience as a praxis embedded within networks of power? Answers to this question lurk in debates about field theory (Crocker et al., 2015; Parlett, 1991) that can be summarized as follows: Does it understand "environment" in a constructivist manner, as an individual's subjective or constructed perception of reality, or does "environment" have some kind of independent and objective existence? For some—including Lewin (1951)—the answer is "the former," which leads to relatively psychologized explanations of how individuals perceptually organize their environment, including their relationships with others. In this formulation, it is difficult to argue for the objective existence of, for example, power structures such as class and gender or even something called "nature." If, however, environment is conceptualized as having an objective existence, then more sociological applications are conceivable, where one may share a field—such as class or gender identity—with others (Robine, 2015).

Although these respective positions can seem irreconcilable, Robine (2015) offers a helpful reframing when he notes that

I may be able to conceive of the other as an organism with an environment, but I experience him or her only as environment, part of my own environment. The constructivist approach has to be linked to the objectivist approach in a dialectical to-and-fro tension, rather than merged together in some impossible synthesis. (p. 494)

In other words, he suggests that Gestalt field theory offers an advance on Lewin's version through its both/and approach; "[h]ence it is possible to speak of the field of a particular person or client (organism) *and* his or her environment" (p. 493, emphasis added). In further support of this view, Robine notes that within Gestalt theory, use of the term "organism" rather than "subject," "person," or "individual" "does not imply exclusive reference to the self" (p. 493) but attempts to "break with a purely mentalist conception of the field" (p. 497). In noting that Gestalt therapy was the first and only therapy to use an ecological framework, ecopsychologist Roszak (2001) similarly values Gestalt field theory's capacity to transcend a purely subjectivist view, perhaps also indicating its value for environmental educators who are often specifically interested in facilitating experiences at the contact boundary of organism and the natural environment. At the very least, when understood along the lines suggested by Robine, field theory offers a productive way of accommodating tensions between psychological and sociological modes of explanation.

Furthermore, by locating experience at precisely the point where the interior and subjective world of the organism collides with the social and material affordances of its environment, field theory provides support for Roberts's view of praxis as a political understanding of experience, as a means of "reproducing inequalities or . . . for counter-hegemonic emancipation" (Roberts, 2008, p. 27). An example of this can be seen in the Gestalt perspective that the therapist is a part of the client's environment (and vice versa), so that there is no objective or neutral position for the therapist to inhabit (Clarkson, 2014). The (radical) political implication of this approach is that

it decentres the therapist and calls for a more horizontal or collaborative relation of power between therapist and client than is supported by many other psychological or psychotherapeutic frameworks. In this sense, field theory parallels and confirms the praxis suggested by educational frameworks relevant to experiential education such as situated learning, which similarly decentre teachers, relocating them as participants in learning communities constituted through shared experience with students (Quay, 2003).

Conclusion

Responding to critical questions about the individualist humanistic premises that ground much experiential education theory, this article has attempted to “argu[e] for, rather than assum[e], the desirability of . . . humanistic assumptions” (Seaman et al., 2017, p. NP15) by explicating how Gestalt praxis supports a coherent and socially responsible framework for apprehending human experience. In summary, by dialogically supporting phenomenological attention to experience at the contact boundary, Gestalt therapists cultivate awareness, which is the basis for learning. This is how a commitment to dialogue, phenomenology, and field theory work together in Gestalt praxis, which can also be viewed as an experientially grounded pedagogy. In this sense, the framework of Gestalt therapy is germane to the theorization of experiential education, suggesting how divergent understandings of experience (Roberts, 2008) within this field might be integrated through the combination of philosophy, theory, and practice that constitutes Gestalt praxis.

Gestalt therapy suggests how experiential education theory might develop a less psychologized and more sociological orientation which accounts for the ways in which individual experience is connected to social, cultural, or environmental factors, supporting the emergence of responsible social action. As this article demonstrates, Gestalt theory—in contrast to individualistic manifestations of the human potential movement that have exerted a greater influence on experiential education—was significantly grounded in a sociological sensibility and its well-developed praxis is thus suggestive of how experiential educators might reconcile attention to individual experience with recognition of the ways in which that experience is socially, culturally, and environmentally shaped. Overall, it provides a practical roadmap for simultaneously attending to multiple concerns that animate experiential education: intrapersonal or internal processes, intersubjective processes, and field-sensitive considerations.

Although further elaborating practical examples of possible integrations between the fields of Gestalt therapy and experiential education is beyond the scope of this article, potential articulations could include collaborating to defend humanistic principles of experiential education from the dehumanizing effects of neoliberal educational policy; designing research processes and outputs that challenge the Cartesian separation of theory and practice; enticing therapists out of their offices and into classrooms or learning environments; incorporating psychotherapeutic principles into teacher training; or collaborating to support communities in pursuing social and environmental justice. Certainly, given the turn toward experience in

higher education and contemporary flourishing of cooperative social processes in general (Hawken, 2007; O'Hara, 2016), defining experiential education more explicitly in terms of Gestalt praxis promises a timely enhancement of both, in the service of socially responsible objectives.


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