

GROUP

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Introduction

This issue of *GROUP* has several notable features. We have a long article from Peter Cole, a well-known gestalt therapist from California, and coauthor Daisy Reese. Although gestalt therapy has been practiced in therapy groups for many years, we have somehow overlooked that segment of the group community in our journal, and they have been relegated to journals devoted exclusively to gestalt therapy. We are publishing this article to start to remedy that omission and to welcome more readers with a gestalt orientation.

We have two other regular articles. Albert J. Brok gives his thoughts about hope and envy in group therapy. Emily Steinberg and her colleagues Joanna Gedzior, Phyllis Mervis, and Philip Luloff, all from Mount Sinai School of Medicine, describe their way of optimizing the coleadership of therapy groups in the hospital.

An important innovation in this issue is the dialogue between Walter N. Stone, who writes our Thinking About Our Work series, and five commentators. We have wanted for some time to find a way to make the journal more interactive, and this exchange is a step toward that goal. After Dr. Stone's comments on romantic love, a feeling that sometimes arises in our groups, Richard M. Billow, Bonnie Buchele, Carol Kramer Slepian, Ronnie Levine, and J. Scott Rutan all give their very different reactions to Dr. Stone's thoughts. Then Dr. Stone replies to their comments.

As always, we welcome comments and responses to these articles and any ideas or suggestions readers might have that would make the journal more useful to them.

—Lee Kassan, Editor

Relational Development in Gestalt Group Therapy

Peter Cole^{1,2} and Daisy Reese³

The authors discuss their personal odyssey, from leading hot seat-oriented gestalt group therapy to taking an interactive process-oriented approach. They explicate two aspects of relational development: the self-activating aspect and the intimately connected aspect. They discuss nine musings on the practice of gestalt group therapy, which include discussion and case material on rupture and repair of the selfobject tie, affective flow, and affective processing. Case examples are provided throughout.

KEYWORDS: Gestalt therapy; gestalt group therapy; affective processing; selfobject tie; rupture and repair.

In this article, we present some of the themes, modes of thinking, and methods that have emerged in our pursuit of a gestalt group therapy (GGT) model that promotes relational development. We define *relational development* as a growing capacity for creative, empowered living that is deeply connected to self and other. Our therapeutic approach to advancing relational development in GGT involves the promotion of growth for each individual group member and for the group itself as an increasingly humane and facilitative environment. Our model has evolved into a weaving together of three threads: the first two are developmental threads involving individual group members, whereas the third involves working with the group-as-a-whole. These threads are as follows:

- 1 The authors wish to thank Lee Kassan for his patience, guidance, and editorial excellence in helping them shape this article through many drafts. The authors also thank Bud Feder, PhD, for his careful and astute feedback on an earlier draft.
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- 3 Codirector, Sierra Institute for Contemporary Gestalt Therapy, and Clinical Faculty, Psychotherapy Institute of Berkeley Group Therapy Training Program.
- 4 This article contains gestalt therapy terms that may not be familiar to some readers. Please see Yontef's (1991) excellent general introduction to gestalt therapy for basic terminology and concepts.

1. a classical gestalt therapy view of growth, which places emphasis on awareness, authenticity, agency, healthy boundaries, experimentation, self-support, and choice; we refer to this thread as the *self-activating* aspect of relational development (Perls, 1973; Resnick, 1978; Simkin, 1998)
2. a contemporary–relational gestalt therapy view of growth, which places an emphasis on empathy, connection, dialogue, and sensitivity to the vulnerabilities that accompany relationality; we refer to this thread as the *intimately connected* aspect of relational development (Hycner, 1993; Hycner & Jacobs, 1995; Staemmler, 2009; Wheeler, 2000; Yontef, 2009)
3. a field-oriented view of group development, which integrates group process and group dynamics principles; from this perspective, the group is seen as a facilitating environment for each group member's growth and development, and we refer to this thread as the *group-as-a-whole* aspect of gestalt group development (Aylward, 1996; Fairfield, 2009; Feder, 2013; Feder & Frew, 2008; Kepner, 1980)

In weaving together these threads, new modes of thinking about GGT have arisen for us—modes that have emerged from our earlier training and experiences but that cannot be traced back with linearity to what we have previously learned, because these new models are the products of emergent processes that were forged in the crucible of many years' absorption in leading, studying, and participating in gestalt and psychodynamic groups. This article is our attempt at articulating these new ways of thinking about, intervening in, and working with gestalt groups. The organizing idea underlying all of the musings, reflections, and case examples in this essay is simply stated: The gestalt group can be felicitously approached as a microcosm of each group member's relational universe, and working creatively with the group process provides abundant opportunity for the growth and development of each member's capacity for relational development.

OUR JOURNEY WITH GESTALT GROUPS: SOME PERSONAL BACKGROUND

We have been coleading gestalt therapy treatment, growth, and training groups for more than twenty years. For the first ten years or so, we practiced GGT in the modality we had been taught by our gestalt mentors: working primarily within a model that focuses on individual pieces of work within the group. We did much meaningful work in this mode, and still frequently do individual pieces of work in the group. Over time, however, we began to notice issues, dilemmas, and complications developing in the background of the group experience, issues that felt underdeveloped in our group work. Such issues included group-as-a-whole phenomena, such as conflicts or ruptures occurring within our groups, group members feeling excluded, group members feeling hurt or damaged by the group experience, and unexpressed eroticism

and competition. Furthermore, we carried many bad feelings away from the group experience, as the unexpressed material affected us as well as the group members.

Reading Feder and Ronall's (1980) seminal collection *Beyond the Hot Seat: Gestalt Approaches to Group* gave us new ways of thinking about gestalt groups and provided us with models of understanding group process and group development. We resonated with Feder and Ronall's statement that

the group-as-a-whole—more than and different from the sum of its parts—is a powerful force for better or worse. If recognized and skillfully used by the leader, the forces inherent in the group become agents for growth and healing; if ignored, misunderstood or misused, these forces can prevent or hamper growth and movement, and their effect can be toxic. (p. xii)

Beyond the Hot Seat convinced us that we needed to pursue further training. Reading about these new, more interactive approaches to working with gestalt groups piqued our interest, yet we lacked the skills necessary to work in a highly interactive, process-oriented mode. We felt that fundamental gestalt understandings, such as the paradoxical theory of change, commitment to the dialogue, the promotion of awareness, and field theory, could be thoroughly applicable in a context that seeks to develop the group-as-a-whole along with the individuals in the group.

A terrible event provided further motivation to our search for new skills in leading gestalt groups. A beloved gestalt trainer, a man who had been a major mentor for me in the hot seat model and who had been my therapist for many years, committed suicide one night immediately after leading a gestalt therapy training group.⁵ This tragic and traumatic event underscored for us the importance of pursuing further understanding of the powerful forces at work within gestalt therapy groups—forces that impact group members and leaders alike.⁶

This search led us to the Washington (D.C.) School of Psychiatry's National Group Psychotherapy Institute. At the Washington School, we learned to better understand groups as systems and to think more deeply about the role of the leader in fostering individual and group development. We learned how and why to work with group-as-a-whole perspectives, about stereotypical group roles that can form and get acted out in harmful ways, about how to address issues working powerfully in the group background, such as competition and eroticism, and about new ways to understand group dynamics.

We have journeyed on the path of both gestalt group membership and gestalt group leadership for many years now. This article is a reflection on the models we have developed on this journey of learning and practice: It reflects ways of thinking

⁵ When we use the first person pronoun, we are referring to Peter.

⁶ See "In the Shadow of the Leader: Power, Reflection, and Dialogue in Gestalt Group Therapy" (Cole, 2013), a piece I wrote in the aftermath of this tragedy.

about GGT that animate our current work. This article represents our own unique (and idiosyncratic) approach. No one at the Washington School nor any of our many gestalt mentors can be blamed for what we have written. The musings that follow can be pinned only on us.

A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO THE SELF IN GESTALT GROUP THERAPY (GGT)

Gestalt therapy proposes that the *self* can be best conceptualized as the active process of living at the contact boundary where the individual meets the environment. The *self* that occurs at the contact boundary is always developing, changing, and in process. Gestalt therapy's understanding of the self emphasizes fluidity and emergent processes rather than cemented certainty. When we speak of the environment, we are referring to other people, to the physical, natural, and social environments within which we individuals exist. The environment, too, is always fluid, evolving, and dynamic.

Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) referred to the *self* as "the system of contacts at any moment. . . . The self is the contact-boundary at work" (p. 235). It is sometimes said in gestalt therapy that *self* is a verb. This active and process-oriented approach to the self provides for a particularly good fit with a process-oriented approach to group therapy. In GGT, where contacting is a two-way street, the group process provides many opportunities to work with the person who initiates contact and with the other, also present in the group, who receives the contact and in turn has his or her own subjective experience of the contact. When the process of contacting occurs within a group container that values awareness, growth, empathy, and truth, the conditions are ripe for a relationally rich path to emotional growth. This emotional growth is infused with a growing capacity to stay connected with all things human in self and other. We refer to this emotional growth, cultivated in the interactive connectedness of GGT, as *relational development*.

Two Dimensions of Relational Development: The Self-Activating Aspect and the Intimately Connected Aspect

We have identified two distinct threads that are woven together to create the tapestry of relational development: the *self-activating aspect* and the *intimately connected aspect*. Let us look at each in turn.

The classical or Perlsian (referring to Fritz Perls) thread in gestalt therapy, which we will refer to as the self-activating aspect, pursues the sensibility of a self occurring at the contact boundary with sufficient aggression and sense of agency to destructure the introjected givens, to find and assert one's voice, and to forge a full, authentic, and well-lived life. An important metaphor in this mode is the act of chewing—the act of chewing means that we do not swallow our food whole. Psychologically, by "chewing," we destructure the "shoulds" that we have introjected and learn to live

with authenticity and choice. For example, a vital ingredient of the Perlsian thread is gestalt therapy's historical acceptance of homosexuality and its refusal to pathologize homosexual needs and desires. The self-activating aspect searches for authenticity, not for conformity to societal, familial, or classical Freudian prejudices. The aesthetic of the self-activating aspect reflects strength, clarity, and authenticity.

The contemporary thread in gestalt therapy focuses on empathy and the interpersonal qualities that we bring to the boundary in good-quality contact: vulnerability, mutuality, and openness (Hycner, 1993; Hycner & Jacobs, 1995; Lee & Wheeler, 2003; Staemmler, 2009; Wheeler, 2000). We refer to this dimension as the intimately connected aspect. The guiding image in this thread is that of two people involved in an intimate, mutually vulnerable, and mutually risk-taking conversation: a dialogue. This is a dialogue in which each party is willing to risk his or her well-staked-out positions and defenses to dig deep in seeking a true and meaningful connection. In this way, the two persons seek to be seen, known, and understood and, through contact and empathy, to see, know, and understand each other. Barriers to contact in the intimately connected aspect frequently involve shame. The aesthetic of the intimately connected aspect reflects the messiness of connection, vulnerability, rupture, and repair.

We have come to value an approach to *relational development* in GGT that appreciates and balances both self-activating and intimately connected qualities and aesthetics. We have experienced time and again that the client with an underdeveloped self-activating aspect usually has corresponding difficulties with the intimately connected aspect, and vice versa. Furthermore, we have found that moving beyond the hot seat in our group work, with a new attention to the group-as-a-whole, has helped clients and trainees develop a greater facility with a relationality that encompasses both the self-activating and intimately connected aspects of development.

Working With the Group-as-a-Whole

Working with the group-as-a-whole involves viewing the group as a complex system that, like a family system, has its own overt and covert rules, norms, and demands. Because each member of the group (including the leader) is part of the group-as-a-whole, having the gestalt group function in as healthy a way as possible is in the interest of everyone. All groups, just as all individuals, have both healthy, functional tendencies, which facilitate the work of the group, and unhealthy, dysfunctional tendencies, which impede it. To work effectively with the group-as-a-whole, we find that it is important to encourage open, ongoing feedback and dialogue within the group about both of these tendencies as they play out in the group process. We expressly support this feedback and dialogue so that a culture may form that respects and values all group members in the co-creation of a healthy, functional group that facilitates relational development.

We ask that group members attend to and voice their feelings about the group-as-

a-whole. We encourage members to reflect on and discuss group-as-a-whole issues such as the safety level in the group, unspoken rules and norms that people are not talking about (yet feel constrained by), elephants in the room (issues that feel too dangerous to give voice to), negative feelings about the leaders, and a whole range of issues that may be forming in the background of the group. In so doing, our goal is not to become a perfect group that has no problems but to work toward being a group that can talk about our problems, challenges, and difficulties.

Another technique that we use in working with the group-as-a-whole is to offer our observations, conjectures, interpretations, and hunches as points of inquiry and dialogue in the group. Statements such as “I’m aware that Mary is frequently becoming the focus of our attention in the group in sharing her despair; I’m wondering if we, as a group, are coming to rely on her to express these kinds of feelings” may be made to the group. In voicing such a question, the leader is not insisting that this perspective be adopted by the group as the “truth”; instead, he or she is respectfully offering an idea for everyone’s consideration. In the spirit of dialogue, the leader is then open to what comes up for group members in response to this. Dialogue around this question might evolve into an object of contemplation: “Do you resonate with the feeling of despair Mary is describing?” An invitation might follow, such as, “Would you be willing to share those feelings with the group?”

Group Process

Group process refers to an ongoing dialogue among all group participants, including the leaders. This ongoing dialogue includes feedback, resonances, confrontations, imaginings, and all manner of thoughts and feelings that emerge in the experience together. When referring to the group process, we are particularly focused on here-and-now interactions that are occurring in the group (Schoenberg & Feder, 2005).

With a focus on what is happening in the here and now of the group process, the relationships here in the room become a primary source of learning, growth, experiment, and change. The complex relational cloth being woven in group members’ experiences of each other, of the leaders, and of themselves enriches the group experience and provides invaluable opportunities for growth and integration. In working more creatively with the group process, and enlisting group members in this as well, we have found that our groups have become safer, more honest, more egalitarian, and livelier. Relationality, in its self-activating and intimately connected qualities, seems to have strengthened and deepened, our clients’ lives seem to have improved, and our groups feel to us like healthier environments.

NINE MUSINGS

We have organized the rest of this article around nine musings that have emerged for us in the practice of a process-oriented GGT. These musings reflect in particular

our focus on relational development in GGT. We discuss each in turn and illustrate with some case examples as we go.

1. A Relational Group Culture Supports Each Member’s Relational Development

Human growth and development do not occur in isolation. Relational growth and development are the hard-won rewards of staying open to and connected with others. We need relational connection to think clearly about our lives, to connect with our feelings, to shuttle between our inner and outer worlds, to develop our capacities for self-support (i.e., the self-activating aspect), and for contactfulness (i.e., the intimately connected aspect). We need relational connection to help us support joy, sexuality, and excitement. We need relational connection to bear our share of suffering. We need relational connection to develop compassion. We need relational connection to develop personal power that is balanced with empathy and compassion.

Living relationally, however, entails the sometimes painful and often terrifying process of opening to others. There are, of course, myriad challenges and difficulties involved in opening to others. These include the very real dangers of betrayal, abandonment, destructive competition, seduction, or humiliation at the hands of others who have not done sufficient work on themselves to have become reasonably safe partners on the journey of relatedness. And there are the considerable difficulties involved in changing our own patterns of relating, patterns that have served to protect us in a great many ways from the insults, deceptions, neglect, and abandonments we may have faced in both childhood and adulthood. The contact disturbances so well known to gestalt therapists—confluence, introjection, projection, retrojection, and so on—all serve in one way or another to protect us from these kinds of hurts. They are our creative adaptations to life in an often hurtful world, and these adaptations shape our style of contact making in the present moment, defining and circumscribing our capacity for relatedness over time.

This brings us to the relational culture that we seek to co-create in GGT. We endeavor to create a safe-enough space for members to form deeply meaningful, intimately connected relationships between group members and to explore the feelings and disturbances to good-quality contact that arise in relation to the hurts, attractions, difficulties, and ruptures that emerge in the group. Within this relational culture, group members are provided with the safe emergency of a vital group process in which all the positive and negative feelings that get stirred up in the experience can be intensively explored and worked with. We do not seek a utopian experience in the group culture. Instead, we presuppose that all the difficulties of life will find their way into the group and that the group, with its support for speaking truth, can and will provide support for members in opening up to a wider range of possibilities in how they experience, how they relate, and how they choose. Our goal

is to foster an atmosphere of awareness and reflection that is safe enough in which to work on life's riskiest material.

2. The Co-creation of a Safe Container Is a Support for the Intimately Connected Aspect of Relational Development

As group members become increasingly connected through their participation in the group process, passions, vulnerabilities, and previously covered-over sensitivities tend to come to the fore. This is exactly what we want to occur, as group members can more readily do the work of integration and change when they are in touch with their vulnerabilities and stuck places in the here and now of the group process. However, bringing forth this kind of material in the group often puts group members in a state of vulnerability, and group boundaries are an important support to this kind of opening. We think of group boundaries that support enough safety to do life's riskiest work as the co-creation of a safe and strong container.

Jim is a 45-year-old married college professor who revealed in the group his attraction to another group member, Mary, a 32-year-old single nurse. Jim experienced this disclosure as extremely risky, as he had strongly suppressed the sexual feelings that contact with some of his female students had stirred in him. His sexual desires were deeply hidden from others and were causing him great strife, conflict, and guilt. Bringing his feelings of attraction to another group member into the group process was a courageous act that carried with it both a positive potential for growth and healing in his sexuality and a negative potential for experiencing shame and pushing his sexual issues deeper into hiding.

For her part, the feelings that Jim revealed about her hit a nerve for Mary. She had recently shared in group about casual sexual involvements with men she had been meeting at bars. She was quite conflicted about these liaisons. Jim's confession brought forth a conflicted mix of feelings for her. She felt pleasure and excitement at being desired by Jim, yet she felt shame about her earlier sharing concerning her casual sexual encounters and discomfort that perhaps Jim had been titillated by her earlier sharing and that he was now only seeing her as a sexual object.

In this example we can begin to see the potential for growth, along with the difficulties, sensitivities, and complexities, that arises when we engage with the intimately connected aspect of relational development in the group. The intimately connected aspect often carries with it a vital current of sexuality, and in GGT, these feelings need to find safe expression. The question for us to consider here is how to make this kind of sharing safe enough so that both Jim and Mary, as well as the rest of the group, can productively explore and discuss issues that have the potential to bring up both the excitement and the shame that intimate and sexual issues frequently evoke.

This brings us to a discussion of the safe container. For both Jim and Mary, engaging in this dialogue requires well-defined boundaries, or what we refer to as a *safe and strong container*. To proceed with her explorations, Mary needs to trust that Jim is not going to approach her outside the group for a relationship, and both Jim and Mary must trust that group members are going to maintain confidentiality. The GGT leader must address the boundaries and rules that promote a sense that the group is safe enough to support the risky work of opening up in the intimately connected dimension.

As a practical matter, we do not have a rigid set of rules that we follow with every group, as different groups call for different boundaries. For example, training groups require different boundaries than treatment groups, and groups for people with personality disorders may require different rules from groups for high-functioning people. However, here are some basic guidelines that we follow:

- Confidentiality is a basic and fundamental commitment that each group member is required to make.
- If group members have contact outside the group, they commit to not gossiping about other group members in that contact, and they commit to talking with the group about that contact.
- Group is not a place to search out or pursue sexual partnerships.
- Communication is expressed nonabusively.

Of course, there is a great deal more to the co-creation of a safe container than the level of bottom-line behaviors that are to be avoided. In fact, all of the musings in this article can be thought of as supports to the co-creation of a safe and strong container. Nevertheless, we have found that the clear articulation of the rules of the group is a support. Frequently, there will be much discussion and dialogue around the group boundaries. When rules are broken, this is important grist for the mill. We welcome these discussions as they promote the co-creation of a safe and strong container.

As it turned out, Jim and Mary spent a good deal of time on these issues, and both grew from the experience. Both were able to talk about the feelings evoked, and both observed the boundaries of the group, so that they were able to risk and grow in the dialogue. Over time, Jim grew more accepting of his sexual attraction to Mary and confident that he could hold and integrate these feelings without either suppressing them or acting on them: He learned to "hold a charge." On campus, in his work, he developed a greater capacity to accept his desires as part and parcel of his human condition rather than as a source of shame. Mary, in turn, learned much about her responses to men and discovered a greater capacity for holding her own when faced with a man and his desire for her.

3. The Leader's Attention Shifts and Flows Between Three Levels of Experience in the Group: The Individual Level, the Dyadic Level, and the Group-as-a-Whole Level

We generally work with individual-level issues in the familiar mode of one-on-one work between the leader and a group member. Dyadic issues involve two group members who have an issue between them that needs the support of the group to get sorted out. Group-as-a-whole issues involve everyone in the group as a family or system in which we deal with problems, such as splitting, individuals getting pushed into certain stereotyped roles, group norms, and so on.

Individual Level

A piece of individual work with the leader in our current group work looks a lot like it would have in our hot seat days. We have not thrown the baby out with the bathwater, and there is still room in our groups for a hot seat piece of work with the leader. However, there is more flow now, in that pieces of individual work seem to flow into the dyadic and group-as-a-whole levels that involve other members much more readily.

Broadly speaking, we would include the working through of a feeling between a group member and the leader in the category of individual work. Frequently, when one group member is working with a feeling toward the leader, other group members will also be stimulated to work with such feelings by way of empathy and/or resonance, and an individual-level piece of work might easily flow into group-as-a-whole work.

Dyadic Level

Work at the dyadic level can be very exciting and broadening for the group members involved and for the entire group. Work between two people can be useful and productive when

1. difficulties arise between two group members, such as when one member experiences another member's comment as a put-down
2. a connection develops between two group members that they wish to explore, such as a sexual attraction
3. there is a shared feeling or experience between two group members, such as two women, both of whom had abandoning fathers, who together explore their experiences, feelings, and styles of making contact with men

Group-as-a-Whole Level

Work at the group-as-a-whole level is looking at the whole group as a system. At this level, we all, group members and the group leaders, track how the group feels and how we are functioning. We look at developments, such as ways in which group members are enlisted by the group into playing out certain roles and thereby carry feelings in the group that other members are not owning. In group therapy theory, it is said that individuals may have a *valency* for carrying a feeling for the group (Bion, 1960; Rutan, Stone, & Shay, 2007). For example, one member might have a valency for carrying the group's anger at the leader. Another might have a valency for carrying the group's sexuality or the group's depression. A person could have a valency for being excluded or blamed. It should be noted that a valency is not simply the individual projecting his usual issues onto the group. Instead, a valency is the individual's vulnerability to enacting something powerful, in which the group and the individual collude, with varying degrees of awareness, to manifest something that is being otherwise disowned by group members.

Tiffany had a valency for being treated with quiet disdain by other members of a therapy group. Her drug-addicted mother had abandoned her when Tiffany was just six, and she was raised by her father and stepmother, who subsequently had three more children. Her stepmother never treated Tiffany well and excluded her from the love and protection she provided her biological children. Tiffany's half siblings were often cruel to her. Tiffany had adopted a whining, self-pitying, oral, needy style in her group relationships that left others annoyed and impatient with her. The group had found in Tiffany a person who would enact the scapegoat role—someone in whom their unwanted qualities could be projected out and disowned. Tiffany's valency for feeling and becoming left out and needy blended with the group's primitive need for a scapegoat to hold their contempt and disdain, and a full-fledged enactment was under way.

The beauty of a group-as-a-whole perspective and intervention in this type of enactment is that it helps further everyone's growth. Tiffany's oral/needy style of making contact is only a part of the problem, and working with this without looking at the group's part can further scapegoat her. Involving the whole group in reflection of this material helps further everyone in the group's growth and allows Tiffany an experience of being part of a group that will look at and try to own its shadow side. Further healing may occur as group members try to take responsibility for their own behavior. This owning of their part may open the door for Tiffany to look at her off-putting style of relating to others in the group.

We asked the whole group to look at what Tiffany might be holding for the group in expressing feelings of being left out in the cold and wanting. As group

members shared their experiences of feeling left in need, both in the group and in their lives, the pressure lifted off of Tiffany, and she was able to explore new ways of making contact with other group members.

Another benefit of the group-as-a-whole perspective is that it can be helpful in the reduction of shame. Shame reduction can occur when the group leaders seek to involve the whole group in issues that have caused shame for a particular group member.

Ethan revealed to the group his addiction to high-risk sexual behavior with street prostitutes. On revealing this to the group, he began to have a strong shame response. A simple group-as-a-whole intervention was to thank him for being so courageous in bringing this into the group and to praise his leadership in the group by taking risks in going deeper with his sharing. This opened the door for others to share sexual secrets that they had been keeping. In highlighting the leadership that Ethan was providing for the group-as-a-whole, his sharing of material that might have brought him increased shame instead brought him relief and a sense of greater closeness with other group members, who were able to follow his lead and share sensitive sexual material with the group.

4. Tension Between a Relational–Contactful Position Versus an Alienated–Contact-Avoidant Position Shows Up at the Individual, Dyadic, and Group-as-a-Whole Levels in GGT

A basic polarity with which we work in GGT is living our lives in the rich, dynamic uncertainty of a relational–contactful position, as opposed to seeking the safety and apparent self-sufficiency of assuming an alienated–contact-avoidant position. From the relational–contactful position, we seek to know others and to be known, to grow in compassion, to be open and creative. From the alienated–contact-avoidant position, we defend ourselves from others, we strive for control, and we stake out our positions rather than seeking truth. From the relational–contactful position, we accept the pain that comes with connection, honesty, and humility. From the alienated–contact-avoidant position, we protect ourselves from pain through avoidance of intimacy and connection.

Let us look at how this basic polarity manifests at the individual level, the dyadic level, and the group-as-a-whole level.

Individual Level: The Ongoing Choice to Live From a Relational–Contactful Position Versus the Choice to Live From an Alienated–Contact-Avoidant Position

Individual participants in GGT face a particular tension with which each group member works in her own way, within her own context, and with her own ongoing

choices. The safe choice is to remain hidden, to protect ourselves through a variety of strategies that lead to disconnection, alienation, and contact avoidance. Getting stuck in the alienated–contact-avoidant position keeps us safe but exacts a terrible penalty: our slow but inexorable drift away from integration and selfhood. It is through choosing relationality and contactful living that we develop and integrate our many selves, our many feeling states (Polster, 1995). Getting stuck in the contact-avoidant position blocks us from the self-development that occurs in the vulnerability of relationality and connection. We all have strivings toward contactful relatedness and countervailing tendencies toward contact-avoidant alienation. In balance and integration, contact avoidance is transformed from a static and stuck state of disconnection from others into healthy, temporary withdrawal from contact that supports ongoing relationship, similar to Zinker's (1998) phase of withdrawal within the cycle of experience.

We do not seek resolution of this fundamental tension, for each person will always have both tendencies to choose relatedness and other tendencies to choose alienation. The gestalt group, with its feedback, long-term relationships, care, and honesty, is an ideal setting for learning more about these choices, which we all share and must work with. Again, our therapeutic goal is not the resolution of life's problems so much as the development of a self that can continue to learn, grow, and love in the face of life's contradictions, disappointments, losses, and polarities. We do not seek victory of the relational–contactful position over the alienated–contact-avoidant position. Instead, we work to highlight this polarity as an ongoing choice of working toward connection, while also appreciating the tendency to isolate. We teach our clients the difference between withdrawal in the service of relationship and isolation that works against relationship.

The gestalt group therapist works to hold, appreciate, and open up dialogue around the polarity of choosing the relational–contactful position versus the alienated–contact-avoidant position. Frequently, this material will show up in group members' plans to leave the group, in low commitment to doing the work of the group, in coming late, in staying silent about major life issues, and in other manifestations of ambivalence.

Sally was in individual and group therapy with me. She had been missing group rather frequently since her mother had taken ill. She talked about her mother's illness in individual therapy but did not tell the group about it. As we explored this in her individual sessions, Sally said that her mother's illness was "too personal to share in the group." As we began to explore what "too personal to share" meant to Sally, she said that she would feel extremely vulnerable in group if people knew how distressed she was about her mother's illness. Sally became aware of an introject from her Irish-American family that talking to outsiders about family issues was a sign of weakness and that strong people remain silent. This awareness led to a good deal of work around how she keeps people

at arm's length and thereby misses out on much richness and support. Working with these issues in her individual therapy created an opening for Sally to talk with the group about her mother's illness and her own distress around it. She worked with accepting support from other group members and with taking in the group's love and support as a source of resilience and strength rather than as a sign of her weakness.

Dyadic Level: The Tension Between the Relational-Contactful Position Versus the Alienated-Contact-Avoidant Position Often Shows Up in the Interactions Between Two Group Members

Issues that arise between two group members will frequently have a feeling of intensity for one or both members—bringing up conflict, competition, or attraction. Supporting both members of the dyad in staying related to each other even in the face of strong feelings can enhance relationship and contact.

As a child, Aaron had been molested by a priest. Additionally, his mother had been very sexually stimulating toward him throughout his childhood. As an adult, Aaron had a great deal of difficulty in forming and maintaining intimate relationships with women. When he described himself in typically self-deprecating terms, Chloe, an attractive group member, told Aaron that she liked him and was disturbed by how he put himself down. Aaron raised a hand, palm out—like a traffic cop signaling “stop”—and went on to a quite defensive exposition about how she had “not heard him.” I intervened in this exchange with the hope of slowing down the interaction so that we could work with it. I pointed out to Aaron his raising his hand and asked him to try the gesture again with awareness and to put words to what his hand was saying to Chloe. This time, he raised his hand and said to Chloe, “This is getting scary, and I need you to stop.” I asked him to stay with it and to see if he might say what was scary. “I’m not used to talking with women this way—I like Chloe, and I get shy when a woman likes me back.” I asked if it would be all right to hear from Chloe. Chloe shared her surprise and delight that Aaron liked her. She had had no idea and said that she thought he found her annoying. The fact that Aaron liked her was particularly important to Chloe, as she had quite a lot of difficulty in her relationships with men and was confused about how men responded to her.

Aaron and Chloe were both energized, blushing, and smiling. I asked Aaron to attend to his body—to what he felt. He shared a sense of pleasure and excitement in his physical body and an emotional sense of expansiveness. Chloe shared her sense of feeling hot, flushed, and engaged. I asked Aaron to attend to the moment, to the experience of feeling pleasure and staying engaged. I asked him to let her in visually and to talk with her about what he was feeling. He talked with Chloe about his experience and then told me that this was enough. Chloe

had had enough too, and the intense contact between them came to a pleasing end. Over the ensuing weeks, both Aaron and Chloe shared progress they had made in dating and relationships. Although they did not connect their progress with the work they were doing in group, we felt that perhaps their increased capacity for pleasure in the group was helping them both with their intimate lives.

In supporting group members at the dyadic level of contact making, the GGT leader helps to make the group more immediate and more contactful by helping to support moments of meeting between two group members. The polarity of the relational-contactful position versus the alienated-contact-avoidant position often plays out at the dyadic level with an intensity and passion that enlivens the whole group.

Group-as-a-Whole Level: The Tension Between the Relational-Contactful Position and the Alienated-Contact-Avoidant Position Often Shows Up with Healthy, Fluid Subgrouping Versus Factionalizing, Splitting, and Unhealthy Subgrouping

There is an unfortunate tendency in human groups to split and factionalize. In groups, people have a primitive tendency to split into opposing camps. Splitting shows up as a boundary disturbance in GGT, as it calls forth confluence between members on one side of the split and projection onto those on the other side of the split. We have learned through hard experience that what can look to the leader like a happy and copacetic group can feel to group members like a junior high school dance, rife with unspoken alliances, hurts, and destructive competition. Much of this suffering is due to hidden splitting and factionalizing. We have learned to look for signs of this kind of splitting—it may show up subtly in the form of interruptions, group members who rarely respond to other group members, or reactivity between subgroups.

On the healthy side of the coin, *fluid* subgrouping can be quite beneficial. With fluid subgrouping, we seek to avail ourselves of the benefits inherent to subgrouping: the support that members can receive through alliances and special connections and the support of finding others with similar difficulties and pains. But while supporting healthy subgrouping, we stay alert to splitting and factionalizing that can turn a group into an emotionally dangerous environment. Furthermore, we pay attention to the tendency of such subgroups to become stuck in intractably opposing camps. Fluid subgrouping means that people can be in one subgroup, made up of a certain group of members in one discussion, but can flow into another subgroup with another group of members with the next discussion. This flow in subgrouping makes splitting and projecting less problematic because the person who was outside of one's subgroup a minute ago may now be a member of one's new subgroup. Primitive projections have less opportunity to take hold when the membership in various subgroupings is dynamically changing.

When we observe that the group is splitting into opposing camps, that members are being subjected to scapegoating or other kinds of unhealthy projection, or when there is a generalized low energy or malaise or persistent conflict in the group, we will often adopt a group-as-a-whole intervention aimed at an exploration of splitting and unhealthy subgrouping in an effort to restore a greater sense of relatedness.

In a therapists group, three group members were talking after the group outside the building on the street. A fourth group member, Ruth, walked out of the building, saw them, and tried to join their discussion. She felt that they were unwelcoming of her. Ruth went home feeling hurt and rejected. She was quite angry at the next group, accusing the other group members of being hurtful. The other three group members in turn were surprised and offended by Ruth's accusation. Two other group members took Ruth's side, and a full-scale split in the group was well on the way to forming.

The next few sessions brought further bad feeling between the two camps. We discussed this issue with our consultation group and came to an understanding that splitting into these two warring camps was pulling the group away from a relational-contactful position and toward an alienated-contact-avoidant position. We offered this perspective to the group: that we as a group were avoiding the work of staying connected and opening up through splitting and fighting. We asked the group to explore feelings and issues that were going unattended because of the group's conflict. This exploration opened the door to new personal sharing from group members, new connections being made, and new fluid connections and subgroups forming on the basis of support rather than getting stuck in opposing camps that had been engaged in projection and conflict. As we worked our way through this impasse, all parties were eventually able to come back to the events that caused the initial bad feeling and repair the rupture that had occurred.

5. Holding, Listening, and Resonating Are Key Functions of the Group Leader

In his or her work of holding, listening, and resonating, the leader is like a musical instrument. Just as the body of a guitar holds the strings at a certain tension and brings the beauty of their sound forward into the room, so does the leader hold the group, listen to the feelings the group members share, resonate with those feelings, and bring the reverberations back to the group for all to feel and consider. With the leader's attention to holding and resonance, group members can actively learn, grow, explore, and develop together. The full spectrum of life—life that is happening in and around the group and its individual members—animates the group so that the work of the group may unfold.

Foreground functions of the GGT leader include intervening, proposing experiments, and doing individual pieces of work. The background functions of holding, listening, and resonating are equally important. The Lacanian psychoanalyst and Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2011) has made the point that what the world needs now is less action and more thinking. He suggests that we need to put less focus on action and more focus on formulating the right questions. We do not know about the political realm, but in the arena of GGT, we find his advice on point.

Here, then, are some reflections on these important background functions of GGT leadership.

Holding

Have you ever noticed the difference between a facilitated group and a peer group? In our experience, these two kinds of groups can feel very different from one other. In the facilitated group, there is someone who is endowed by the group with the responsibility to participate in the group experience in a very particular way. This person *holds* the group. He or she participates differently from the other members. He or she holds the space, listens for how the group is functioning, tunes into the feeling tone of the group, reflects on the group process, and assumes greater responsibility for the welfare of the group. In the leaderless group, there tends to be less safety, less reflection on the process, and more difficulty in productively confronting the people and issues in the group that must be dealt with for the group to function well.

Listening

Most of our time spent in group leadership is spent listening. We listen to the group members. We listen to our fantasies. We listen to the group-as-a-whole. We listen actively. We watch the ability to track what is happening in the group wax and wane. We listen to the music playing in our minds and wonder what it is saying about the group. And we wait for integrative awareness to form inside—an awareness that lends energy to an intervention, musing, interpretation, or experiment.

One reason that we are turned off to formulaic approaches to group therapy, and one of the reasons we love the gestalt approach, is that we cherish GGT's emphasis on creativity, spontaneity, and freedom. Therefore, we are very interested in how the therapist listens. How we take in the people and information is fundamental to how we integrate and work creatively with the material that comes up in the group. And this is deeply personal. We encourage all GGT leaders to think deeply about how you listen to others and how you attend to your own inner muse.

One rule of thumb is that whatever is inside of you—in your body and mind, when you are sitting with the group—is information about the group. We encourage you to listen to what gets activated inside of you and to ask yourself, "What is this

telling me about this group?" By the way, the things that get stirred up in me are often quite silly or banal, yet these little fantasies tell me so much.

I was sitting with a group that was in a stuck place, but no one was talking about the real problems in the group. I found myself fantasizing that everybody was just going to quit the group. Then I went into a memory of a story from a TV show I had seen years ago on a cop show called *Homicide*: an elderly man kills his wife. After much investigating, the cops figure out that he had started up an affair with his high school sweetheart and had killed his wife to get out of the marriage so that he could take up with his old sweetheart. The cops ask him, "Why didn't you just ask her for a divorce instead of killing her in cold blood!?" The man replies, "I didn't want to hurt her feelings!"

I tell this story to the group and suggest that it is telling me that perhaps we in the group would rather kill the group than speak the difficult, unsettling truth. Following my disclosure, the energy in the group picked up dramatically, and a series of difficult interpersonal issues involving everyone in the group came out and got worked with, and the group ended the session in a much livelier, more contactful place.

Resonating

Let us return to the metaphor of the group leader as the body of a guitar, group members as the strings of the guitar, and life itself as the musician. In this metaphor, the leader's most important job is to hold and resonate. Just as the guitar holds the strings at a certain tension to enable them to sound, the leader holds the group members with his or her presence, attention, boundaries, and dedication to the group. This holding then allows members to share their thoughts, feelings, and somatic states and to bring their inner lives into the group space.

The leader resonates with the material that group members bring. He or she reflects back to the group the feelings that are present in the group, and, through his or her resonance, group members have the opportunity to see themselves in a new light. For example, in our coed group, several members talk about scary things: an engineer feels he might be replaced by a computerized tool; a physician feels that she might be getting too old to practice and not make mistakes; a mother frets about her depressed daughter. My resonance to these feelings is that the group is that special place where we can bring our private worries and concerns and have them held without judgment or advice. When the group hears this resonance, they express appreciation and love for each other, and a new feeling of strength and confidence seems to emerge.

6. The Leader's Awareness of His or Her Own Gestalt Formation Process Is His or Her Most Powerful Instrument of Group Leadership

Zinker (1977) has written brilliantly about the gestalt formation process. Philippson (2009) has written brilliantly about emergent properties. In this section, we will look at the GGT leader's gestalt formation as an emergent property of the gestalt group. In the gestalt formation process, we become aware of what is inside of us, and we try on the idea that what is inside is connected with, and in some ways a function of, the field or the group. When we GGT leaders develop our own processes of thinking about our gestalt formation process as a function of the group process, then we are truly doing the work of deepening the dialogue in the group.

According to Zinker (1977), the gestalt formation process goes through the following phases: sensation, awareness, mobilization of energy, action, contact and change, and withdrawal and satisfaction. Following is an example of how the leader's gestalt formation process serves as an important function of group leadership—where the gestalts that form for the leader can be understood as emerging from the group process.

Sensation. Leah abruptly announces that she is planning to leave a therapist group. In the moment of her announcement, Daisy and I both have vaguely sad, anxious, disappointed feelings about her leaving.

Awareness. After the group, Daisy and I share with each other these feelings of disappointment about her decision to leave the group, and together we find that we feel caught in a dilemma. On one hand, we do not want to be coercive by trying to influence her to stay. On the other hand, we feel that she may be choosing to leave because of issues that have been brewing under the surface of the group. Specifically, we feel that Leah might be wanting greater intensity and intimacy in the group, which we feel the group has been avoiding.

Mobilization of energy. We take the issue to our consultation group and hear from others about the issue. We decide that we are going to talk with Leah about it at the next session.

Action. We tell Leah of our dilemma: that on one hand, we respect her decision and do not want to be heavy-handed or coercive about her leaving, but on the other hand, we have some reservations. We ask if she is all right with us expressing our reservations, which she is.

Contact and change. Daisy shares thoughts and fantasies about what may be going on for Leah in relation to the group and also explores feelings that Leah may be having toward Daisy and me. This becomes quite an intense piece of individual work with good-quality contact, and much is explored about the group and how we function, so that the individual work is of great interest to all group participants. Leah expresses much about the group, herself, her relationships, her marriage, and her feelings toward Daisy and me. Group

members get deeply engaged in the dialogue and, after a time, enter in with their thoughts, feelings, and resonances to the work. Leah decided to stay with the group.

Withdrawal and satisfaction. After this piece of work, there is a renewal of cohesiveness in the group (Yalom, 1995) and a sense of connectedness that draws the members together. For our part, Daisy and I feel satisfied that we worked with the sad, anxious, and disappointed feelings we had when Leah announced she was leaving. Soon, another piece of work begins, and other gestalts start forming for Daisy and me as well as for the group members. But the new work is informed by the work Leah has just done, and a process of developing complexity and mastery is palpable in the room, bringing greater support for the emergence of new, complex issues to arise in the group. The group has integrated Leah's work and is now ready to move into more intimacy and intensity with each other.

7. When the Leader Holds the Tension of the Polarities, in the Spirit of the Paradoxical Theory of Change, He or She Helps the Group Hold Complexity, Which in Turn Becomes Fertile Ground for the Emergence of Symbolizing

Beisser (1971) articulated gestalt therapy's paradoxical theory of change:

Change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he is—to be fully invested in his current positions. (p. 77)

Note here that Beisser uses the plural "positions," indicating that the current situation may well be one of polarities and conflict rather than a unitary position.

The paradoxical theory of change provides an excellent framework for working with the many polarities that show up in GGT. Although we usually think of the paradoxical theory of change in terms of the individual who is willfully trying to impose change on himself or herself, it also applies in GGT, as a reminder to us as leaders that our job is not so much to find resolution to the polarities and complexities that our members present but to hold the complexity, to support the group member in taking the time to be exactly who he or she is, to be fully invested in his or her current positions, even when those positions are contradictory and seemingly at polar ends. The paradoxical theory of change reminds us that change is more an act of integration than of will and that, when we hold the complexity of the contradictions, new awareness may well emerge.

Earlier we discussed the basic polarity of the relational-contactful position versus

the alienated-contact-avoidant position. Let us now look at polarities themselves as a phenomenon of the psyche. Perls pointed out that psychological states of being and identifications come in sets of opposites. Thus, for example, the harsh, perfectionist Topdog has its opposite in the flawed yet human Underdog (Perls, 1973). We see an unending series of polarities in people, such as the sanctimoniously religious man who leads a secret sexual life; the kind, sensitive "earth mother" who secretly carries grudges and resentments; the modest wife who secretly encourages her husband's abuses of power; the socially responsible, politically progressive inheritor who secretly disdains those without wealth and power. And, of course, sometimes the less socially acceptable aspects are visible and the "virtuous" side is hidden, such as the ruthless businessman who secretly has a loving, compassionate soft side or the pushy, overly ambitious mother who suppresses her kindness.

In GGT we do not seek resolution of life's contradictions, problems, and complexity. We do not seek cure. Rather, we seek a deeper relationship with the issues that trouble us and hold us in a state of conflict. We seek the development of a sense of self, a sense that is formed in relationship, a self that can continue to flow and grow even while life's most painful issues, conflicts, and challenges feel overwhelming. Rather than seeking resolution to the conflicts, we seek the development of a self, held in the safety of the group, that can work with the issues and conflicts that arise. If this leads to resolution of a particular difficulty or conflict, we welcome this, but we do not aim for it.

In GGT we work with life's polarities. Additionally, we work with the ways that unwanted, unintegrated aspects can get projected onto group members. For example, group members may have difficulty integrating their anger, and a member with a valency for carrying the group's anger gets stuck with it, and in so doing, other group members can reject both their unintegrated anger and the person who is carrying it. This is a form of scapegoating that can easily occur with unintegrated feelings in the group.

The paradoxical theory of change is a great help here. When the leader encourages each member to own his or her own feelings, to fully experience what is, then shortcuts, such as projecting feelings onto another group member, can be contained, and group members have an opportunity to live in and experience the complexity that accompanies owning both sides of their polarities. This can be difficult for group members who are identified with and invested in seeing only one side of themselves and are equally invested in suppressing the disowned side of the polarity. Owning both sides of ourselves can be egodystonic, humbling, and anxiety provoking. But in the discomfort of owning our many selves, even the selves that we disapprove of, we open the door to the emergence of something new—a new understanding, a new level of acceptance, a new feeling.

This "something new" is at once the integration of the opposites, the ability to hold opposites as one integrated whole, and something entirely new that emerges

from holding the complexity of the opposites. This “something new” is the formation of new gestalts that emerge in the crucible of holding the opposites.⁷ This “something new” involves the ability to move from concrete thinking about the polarity to the ability to symbolize. We will discuss the importance of moving from concrete thinking and offer a few case examples in the following sections.

Earlier in this article, we discussed the gestalt formation process along the lines of Zinker’s (1977) cycle of experience. We propose here another process that gives rise to a particular kind of gestalt—a gestalt that has emergent properties. In this process of gestalt formation, the opposites are joined and held. This seemingly impossible task—holding both sides of a polarity—is transformative and gives birth to the new gestalt, a new sense of wholeness based on a fuller sense of self and a greater awareness of the field. Just as the primordial soup of just the right mix of organic compounds, heat, and water gave rise to something new—the first life-forms—so does the emergence of a new gestalt formation rise from the holding of the complexity of the opposites. And, as we have said, the new gestalt that forms out of holding the opposites involves the capacity to symbolize the opposites rather than holding them concretely.

Symbolizing at the Individual Level

Michelle stated many times that she cared for and valued the group and all the people in it, yet she did numerous things that were harmful to the group, such as missing sessions, not paying the fee on time, coming late, creating splits and divisions in the group, and being unwelcoming to new members. When we spoke to her about these behaviors, and shared our curiosity about the feelings underneath, she deflected us. Over time, however, with continued dialogue with the leaders and other group members, she began to own and identify with these destructive tendencies, tying them in with the sexual abuse she suffered in childhood and the creative adjustments she had made to survive a dangerous childhood filled with trauma. In owning the destructive side, and holding at the same time the part of her that did indeed love and need the group, Michelle was holding the tension of the opposites, and she and the whole group were holding the complexity of her experience. What emerged from this was a new gestalt: a different sense of self that was at once more flexible, less brittle, more human, and less perfectionistic than the old sense of self. With this new sense of self, she no longer needed to deflect dialogue about her destructive side but was able to hear it, take responsibility, and symbolize the behavior.

⁷ Justin Hecht’s (2011) discussion of the transcendent function in solving the problem of the opposites, a complementary formulation from the Jungian tradition, was a great help in developing these ideas.

One of the characteristics of new gestalts that emerge from holding the complexity of the opposites is the ability to symbolize. To symbolize is to be able to hold the whole, to connect the present impulse and behavior with history, to hold what triggers us with a sense of what it means to us.

When Michelle was able to hold the opposites—caring for and needing the group, on one hand, yet being destructive to the group, on the other hand—holding both of these came with the ability to symbolize the complex feelings that her growing attachment to the group was activating in her. She connected her attachment to the group to her attachments in her family of origin, where her narcissistic mother and abusive father failed miserably in their ability to empathize with her in childhood. She played the obedient child who perfectly mirrored her narcissistic parents on the outside, but inside she was afraid, hurt, and seething with anger. Her destructive behavior had been an enactment of the rage she felt as a child in having to swallow abuse and neglect to get what good things she could get in her family. When she was able to symbolize and make these connections, she could share with the group the intense feelings that came up for her as she felt her growing attachment to the group, its members and leaders. The group in turn was able to listen, hold her, and help her connect with these feelings, while staying connected with us. This growing capacity to hold the opposites and symbolize translated into better relationships for Michelle at her work and in her family life.

Symbolizing as a Group

Matt brings a problem to the group: He cannot mobilize himself to clean his house or throw things away. He has been hoarding and can barely move around in his house. His Topdog and Underdog sides are split. The Topdog mercilessly berates him, while the Underdog is immobilized, unable to function on this issue. Although he has made a little progress with this issue, he is overwhelmed with feelings of shame. As long as Matt and the group are caught in the Topdog–Underdog split, the group offers a fruitless and shame-inducing series of “helpful suggestions.” The concrete aspect of the issue of his hoarding behavior feels compelling to both Matt and other group members. I sense that we, the group, are missing out on a rich undercurrent of feelings that have been stirred up with this issue. An experiment emerges in my consciousness out of connecting with this complexity. I say to the whole group, “I’d like you all to imagine that Matt’s house, filled with clutter, was a dream image in your own dream. How would it feel, and what would it mean to you, if this were your dream?”

Now group members feel the call of something deeper and more connecting: what this brings up deep inside of them. Now Matt’s issues with his house can

be felt in their symbolic dimension. David remembers growing up in a public housing apartment in an otherwise middle-class Los Angeles neighborhood. He remembers being rejected as a child by friends because his family was on welfare. This brings up fear of being rejected by the group for his current financial and work status. It also brings up a feeling of family chaos that has been internalized as a feeling of inferiority with other people. Other group members share feelings and memories that have come up in imagining Matt's house as a dream image. Matt now reports a reduction in shame and, over the next few sessions, reports progress with getting his house cleared out, getting his bills paid, and getting his paperwork done at work.

8. Affective Flow Is the Water in Which GGT Swims; Affective Processing Is the Work of GGT

Affective flow refers to the ongoing current of feelings running through each person at all times. As long as we are alive, the ongoing affective flow is always occurring in the present moment. This affective flow includes our mood, our emotional response to the immediate field, the currents of our sexual, libidinal energies, our sense of excitement, danger, attractions, and repulsions that are unfolding within us as we move in and through the flow of life in the present moment.⁸

Affective flow is the ongoing emotional dimension of being human. It is the current of feelings moving within us as we live our lives. A common symbol of this ongoing affective flow is a body of water. Bodies of water—oceans, rivers, lakes—often show up in our dreams as symbols of this dimension of our lives: the dimension of feeling, affect, and emotion. This is the water in which GGT swims and may be thought of as the water of human life itself. We return to this water frequently in group life, getting in touch with the flow of feelings that is running through the group and its members.

The affective flow is the water we swim in, but, just as the question of whether the tree that falls in the forest makes a sound when no one is there to hear it, so, too, must we inquire about the impact of the affective flow that occurs outside of awareness. Though affective flow is a constant, making *contact* with the affective flow is very hard work indeed. This work can be thought of as the work of life itself. We will refer to the work of making contact with the affective flow as *affective processing*. The distinction between *affective flow* and *affective processing* is crucial. Every person has an ongoing flow of feelings inside him or her. This affective flow, our organismic response to the field, is natural and ubiquitous. It is a kind of fluid emotional representation of the world that each of us carries within us at all times. The affective flow is always powerfully at work and always colors our subjectivity.

⁸ Sullivan's (2009) discussion of Bion's concept of beta and alpha elements was helpful in developing this section and many of the ideas in this article. We highly recommend her book *The Mystery of Analytical Work: Weavings from Jung and Bion* to psychotherapists of all persuasions.

When this happens outside of awareness, then we are unaware of the most powerful driver of our perceptions, thinking, and contact making. This lack of awareness gives rise to much suffering, for it is then that we react to the affective flow with boundary disturbances that distort our perceptions, impair our relationships, and impede our capacity to think clearly.

It is the work of GGT to use the power of the group to bring the affective flow into awareness. We will call this pursuit of awareness of the affective flow *affective processing*. Affective processing is no small undertaking—it is the most important work of GGT. Affective processing is not gained without hard work, self-reflection, and a willingness to endure some suffering. In our clinical practice, we have found that GGT is a potent milieu in which to engage in the work of affective processing. Awareness does not occur in a relational vacuum. Each person needs much support to be with and deeply take in the affective life that flows within himself or herself, for the water in which we swim is not placid—it is powerfully passionate. Strong feelings, such as love, hate, desire, need, and abandonment, are not easily integrated. In GGT we provide support for the affective processing that is necessary to bring the affective flow into awareness. We do this by working with the individual, dyadic, and group-as-a-whole levels, marshaling support at each of those levels for the challenging work of affective processing. In the self-activating aspect, affective processing helps refine awareness of what we desire to pursue. In the intimately connected aspect, affective processing helps us navigate the complex feelings that help us attach and stay connected with others.

Herein lies the beauty of GGT. In GGT, our purpose is simply to grow more fully into ourselves—we pursue affective processing as a path to the examined, empowered, and relationally rich life. The leaders do not pursue goals such as self-improvement, overcoming depression, losing weight, becoming more successful, or finding the ideal mate in GGT. While many of these things may be welcome, we do not aim for them. What we try to connect with in GGT is the affective processing that brings us into contact with our emotional responses to life. This, we feel, is the royal road to emotional health.

In relative health, we are better able to connect with and process the affective flow so that it informs our large and small choices. In relative ill health, we are dominated by the affective flow, but not with awareness. In ill health, with ineffective affective processing, our perceptions of reality, and our capacity for contactful, richly relational living, are limited. When the affective flow is insufficiently and ineffectively held, we become alienated from our emotional resonances and bodily responses so that our inner life becomes a stranger to us. What, with strong affective processing, would be our greatest source of wisdom instead becomes a fearful, unknown presence that lies at the very core of our subjectivity. When the affective flow is unknown, yet so familiar and powerful, it becomes terrifying. Is it any wonder that primitive fundamentalist systems of thought project the fantasy image of Satan onto this dimension of our lives? Satan is in fact the perfect symbol of how

the affective flow can feel to those who do not have the tools of affective processing that transform the raw material of emotion and sensation into wisdom. Instead, what is inside of us becomes frightening and, as unfinished business, clamors for our attention and for closure. The affective flow becomes ominous and a source of primitive fear, giving rise to projection, splitting, and all manner of suffering. *Affective processing* involves an increasing capacity to stay with our affective flow, to hold it with awareness, and to marshal the signals we receive from our ongoing affective flow in the service of making richer choices, finding better contact, and staying emotionally connected with others.

In GGT, the leader starts with this basic understanding: affective flow is alive in every person in the group at all times. Questions such as "What are you feeling at an emotional level?" "When John says that, how does that make you feel?" "Will you check in with your feelings right now?" all are basic moves in the GGT therapist's playbook. All of these questions, and many of the leader's interventions, are aimed at lending support to group members who are trying to make contact with their affective flow so that it becomes affective processing that brings group members into better contact with themselves and with each other.

The affective flow, of its own accord, does not automatically connect group members with each other. In fact, the affective flow will frequently get enacted in ways that can be destructive to the group process, if group members are unable to engage in sufficiently effective affective processing. By contrast, affective processing is the very thing that provides the connective tissue between group members. In the common search for meaning in our feelings, we find connection, community, and relationality.

In doing the work of affective processing, we discover that there are at least two distinct levels of meaning to be found in the affective flow. These are the *signal level* and the *symbolic level*. Let us look at each in turn.

At the signal level, a feeling or bodily sensation provides immediate information about the individual and the field.

Joe interrupts Mary when she is in the middle of making contact with another group member. Mary feels a rush of anger at Joe for having stepped into her interaction with the other group member.

As a signal, Mary's flash of anger tells her that Joe has encroached on her boundaries and that she needs to set a limit with him.

She asserts herself, saying angrily, "Hey, Joe, stop interrupting me! God, you piss me off!" Joe hears her, blushes, and sheepishly backs off.

Mary has shown healthy self-support. She perceived her anger as a signal that her boundaries were being violated, and she mobilized this feeling into action that supported her needs. Joe, however, feels hurt and deflated. At the same time, on

another level, the affective flow is offering something deeply symbolic. Making deeper contact with the affective flow is what we are calling affective processing.

I say to Mary that I appreciate her self-support in setting this limit with Joe. I ask her about her feelings in having asserted herself in this way. She tells me and the group about her somatic experience of her anger. And this gives rise to a strong memory of her father, whom she experienced as weak and easily hurt. Although he was frequently intrusive with her, she would swallow the anger for fear of hurting him.

Now we are doing the work of affective processing: diving deeper into the waters of the affective flow so that we can perceive the affect not just as signal but also as symbol. The feeling is connected both with the current situation and with history. When we are diving in the deep waters of symbolizing, there is much potential for connection between group members because there is so much that we share at the deepest levels.

I try to grab hold of the potential for connecting in the present moment and see if we can work with the feelings between Mary and Joe. I ask Mary how it felt to set a limit with Joe. She replies, "It felt good. I've gotten to know that Joe is strong, and that I can be honest with him and he'll be okay." I turn to Joe and ask, "How does it feel that Mary experiences you as strong enough to be honest with?" Joe replies to me, "I like it." Joe turns to Mary and says, "It feels good that you see my strength, Mary. I want you to let me know when I interrupt you in the future." Now there are smiles of appreciation for both Mary and Joe in the room.

This example illustrates that working with affective processing at the *signal level* enhances group members' empowerment and is a support to the self-activating aspect in guiding our actions (the signal of Mary's anger supports her *limit setting* with Joe). Working at the *symbolic level* brings us to deeper understanding and connects history with the present moment (finding the deeper connections with her anger supports her *relationship* with Joe). This level of work is a support to the intimately connected self in that it brings members into a shared experience of exploring at the deepest levels. The signal levels and symbolic levels are complementary and refer to deeper levels of understanding our affective flow, just as the self-activating aspect and the intimately connected aspect are complementary and must both be supported in GGT.⁹

⁹ See my paper "Affective Process in Gestalt Therapy" (Cole, 1998) for a more in-depth look at affect as signal and symbol.

9. Dialogue Around Rupture and Repair of the Selfobject Tie Is an Ongoing Process in GGT

Before we focus on the importance of rupture and repair of the selfobject tie in GGT, it may be helpful to review Kohut's (1971) concept of the *selfobject* as it is used in relational gestalt therapy and in self psychology. Lynne Jacobs (1992) states that

self structure is developed and maintained through "selfobject" ties to other people. The term "selfobject" refers to an object experienced subjectively as serving certain functions . . . a dimension of experiencing an object in which a specific bond is required for maintaining, restoring or consolidating the organization of self experience (Stolorow et al., p. 16). . . . In everyday life, our sense of common purpose with colleagues or neighbors, or even the nation we live in, is a selfobject in that it reinforces our temporal stability and supports a positively toned sense of self-with-other. (p. 29)

Jacobs's "positively toned sense of self-with-other" provides a basic ground of support for group members in their healing journey in GGT. When this basic ground of support—the selfobject tie—fails, or is threatened for a group member, we refer to this as a *rupture*. The work of reestablishing the selfobject tie we refer to as *repair*.

Stone (2012), a leading group therapy theorist from self psychology, discussed how the therapy group can serve a selfobject function for group members. Stone stated,

The interpersonal setting of group psychotherapy is particularly suited for patients with deficits to utilize others as selfobjects in the development of a cohesive sense of self. Group members use one another or their inner image of the group-as-a-whole to stabilize their self-esteem and potentially develop more enduring structure and be less vulnerable to narcissistic hurts. (p. 108)

One further formulation is important in understanding the emotional significance of rupture and repair to the individual group member and for the group-as-a-whole. Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood (1987) described a polarity that they called the *repetitive dimension* versus the *selfobject dimension*. In the repetitive dimension, we hold the expectation that our vulnerabilities will be met with the same lack of attunement with which they were met in the original situation, thereby forcing us into fixed gestalts whose origin lies in old patterns of self-protection. At the other end of this polarity is the hope of being held with an attunement that creates enough safety for us to open old wounds to new sources of healing and growth. This dimension Stolorow calls the *selfobject dimension*. Stolorow's powerful formulation helps us understand the stakes and the significance of the process of rupture and repair for the group member. Ruptures that do not get repaired throw the group member into the repetitive dimension, where he or she must establish safety for himself or herself with fixed gestalts—repetitive routines of self-regulation that may

well impede openness and growth. Because the repetitive dimension often involves disturbances in the group member's interpersonal contact making and boundary regulation, when one group member is thrown into the repetitive dimension, others in the group often feel the change in the group field, and they themselves experience difficulty staying open to the selfobject dimension. We have found it useful to teach our groups about the process of rupture and repair to identify and normalize the process. Additionally, we have found that teaching about rupture and repair helps to mobilize the insights and perspectives of all group members in identifying and helping to repair ruptures that occur in the group process.

Ruptures of the selfobject tie frequently occur below the level of awareness. This makes sense when we consider that ruptures tend to throw the group member into the repetitive dimension of experience, and the repetitive dimension, as its name implies, is deeply familiar to each person. In unawareness, we are fixedly adapted to living in the repetitive dimension, and the events that invoke this dimension of experience, being part of a well-worn pattern of experiencing, may feel entirely normal to the group member.

Cheryl was a group member who had played the role of a caregiver whose own needs were neglected in her family of origin. It felt entirely normal to her when she fell into such a role in the group. The "neglected caregiver" was a very familiar stance for her in the repetitive dimension, and therefore a difficult constellation for her to mentalize as it formed in the group. It would be analogous to a fish thinking about the water in which she swims—why would she think about that? The water has always been there!

However, in the group, a new set of feelings got stirred up for Cheryl when the group attended to her in novel and supportive ways. This attention stirred up Cheryl's hope for a new sense of herself, based on group members' attention to her long-neglected need to be seen and appreciated for her many wonderful qualities—qualities that had nothing to do with caretaking, such as a wicked sense of humor, a lovely sexiness, and an amazing singing voice. This new and as yet fragile sense of herself was a tenuous thread held together by the selfobject tie to the group and its leaders.

One day during group, Cheryl started to talk about a date she went on. This was something new and exciting for her that represented growth supported by her selfobject tie to the group. Another group member spoke about her ill mother. The entire group dropped Cheryl and dealt with the other group member. Cheryl shut down for the rest of the session, but nobody in the group, including us leaders, tuned in to her withdrawal. The next week, Cheryl said that she was thinking about leaving the group to spend more time doing volunteer work with the homeless. It then dawned on us that Cheryl had perhaps suffered a rupture to the selfobject tie in the previous session. With discussion and careful unpacking, Cheryl was able to gain awareness of what had happened in the previous group

and her response to it. The whole group was able to help repair the rupture by taking responsibility for our part in it, and Cheryl was finally able to excitedly share with us the story of her budding new relationship. She stayed on with the group for another two years, finishing when she had grown more fully into a new, fuller sense of herself.

Ruptures experienced below the level of awareness have a tendency to show up in the form of enactments, such as a group member suddenly announcing that she is leaving the group, citing such seemingly innocuous reasons as "I'm leaving group because I've taken up meditation and have decided to pursue my spiritual development" or "I'm working on taking better care of myself. It's hard for me to get here to the group after a long day at work, and leaving the group is something I'm choosing to do to take better care of myself." We have found that there is often something important left out of such pronouncements, something associated with a rupture in the selfobject tie. Opening up a dialogue into whether the group member has experienced a rupture, perhaps one that has occurred below the level of awareness, can be fruitful. Of course, it is incumbent on the GGT leader to honor the group member's autonomous decision about whether to stay in the group and to treat that decision with respect, but the leader's respect for the member's autonomy is well balanced by the leader's sensitivity to ruptures in the selfobject tie, which may underlie abrupt decisions to leave the group. It is in part for this reason that we generally ask members early on to give themselves four sessions' notice before leaving our groups.

Within an interactive group process, there are many occasions when individual group members will feel dropped, hurt, misunderstood, neglected, overexposed, or mis-met. All of these hurts can create the experience of rupture of the selfobject tie. These hurts may come from other group members, from the group leaders, or from both. In the emotional atmosphere of GGT, it is no wonder that participants are especially vulnerable, for they are working on letting down the usual defenses that protect them from hurt. Furthermore, the value of honesty in the group supports members in articulating feelings of hurt so that the group can work with ruptures and look at the interactions that have given rise to ruptures from a variety of perspectives. Then all group members can engage in the work of owning responsibility for their piece of the rupture—which then becomes the work of repair. Thus, rupture and repair become an ongoing group process.

Repair refers to reestablishment of the selfobject tie and the restoration of the selfobject dimension of experiencing in the group. The primary methods of fostering repair in the group process are (a) slowing down, (b) unpacking, (c) searching for positive intention, and (d) restoring the empathic link. Let us look more closely at the process of rupture and repair in the context of the group process. These ruptures may show up in the group process in innumerable ways. Following are a few common patterns of interaction that can get created in the group process, giving rise to

an experience of rupture. This list is by no means exhaustive—we share it simply to illustrate the kinds of occurrences that can cause a rupture of the selfobject tie:

Being dropped. A group member shares something that feels important to her, and the group prematurely moves on to another issue.

Being interpreted. A group member feels that he has been put into an interpretive box by the leader or another member.

Being overexposed. A group member has revealed more than she is comfortable with and feels ashamed.

Being ignored. A group member is left alone by the group and feels insignificant or invisible.

Being coerced. A group member feels that the group is pressuring her to do something for which she is not ready.

Being overprotected. A group member feels that the leader or other members come in and save him, thereby limiting his opportunity to risk.

In reading this list, you may recognize that these occurrences cannot be completely avoided. For instance, it is just about impossible to have a group process in which members are free from feeling dropped every now and then. In truth, all of these occurrences are part of the normal ebb and flow of a lively group process. Therefore, our goal in GGT is to work with these issues as they occur, rather than to strive for a utopian group experience in which no one ever gets hurt. This is where rupture and repair become vital processes requiring special skills. When the group appreciates that the experience of rupture provides the entire group with an opportunity to learn and grow, then the group normalizes the process of creating dialogue about these issues. It is the dialogue about the rupture that opens up the possibility of repair.

Repair involves the process of listening to the member who feels hurt, taking in how the hurtful events felt to him or her, and honoring his or her narrative of the hurtful interactions. Furthermore, repair involves the process of each of the people involved taking responsibility for the part he or she played in the hurtful interaction. Repair also involves the person who has been hurt listening to other group members' feelings and their narrative of events. Repair is a deeply interpersonal exploration. It is a journey of listening, empathy, pain tolerance, responsibility taking, open-mindedness, and open-heartedness on the part of the person who feels hurt, those who participated in the events, the leader, and ultimately all group members, as every member of the group field has an effect on all group events.

Some of the most important work of healing in GGT occurs in the processes of dialogue about rupture and repair. In the process of creating dialogue about rupture and repair, group members learn a great deal about empathy, patience, working through difficulty, tolerating the pain of anxiety and shame, commitment, and taking responsibility. Relationships among group members are frequently strengthened in these dialogues.

The work of rupture and repair lies at the heart of relational development. Just as an individual's capacity for reflecting on and working through his or her psychic wounds defines to a large extent the person's capacity for rich relational living, so, too, does the gestalt group's facility in sustaining dialogue about rupture and repair largely define the group's capacity for relationality. Much of the healing in GGT derives from working through the difficulties that arise during group interactions. Therefore, we seek a culture in GGT that has, as a major value, group members' willingness to come forward with the hurts they have experienced in the group process so that the group will have the opportunity for the growth that the ensuing dialogue and contact about rupture and repair provide.

CONCLUSION

Come, come, whoever you are
 Wanderer, worshiper, lover of living
 It doesn't matter
 Come, even if you have broken your vow a hundred times
 Come, come again, come yet again.
 Ours is not a caravan of despair.
 —Rumi

Participating in gestalt groups over the years has been like a grand journey in a caravan peopled with seekers of truth, authenticity, and connection. Participants in GGT come together, knowing that what we seek is at least as much about the journey as it is about the destination. In this article, we have sought to capture some of the insights, experiences, and musings that have animated our thinking up to this point as we continue on the journey.

Our experience has shown us that GGT provides a powerful milieu for growth that is grounded in the relational. We have found that when effectively facilitated, a culture can evolve in the gestalt group that is safe enough to do life's riskiest and most rewarding work: opening up; sharing our secrets; showing our strengths and vulnerabilities; learning how to become more honest, more compassionate, more present, and more connected to others. We have found that the group environment supports its members in becoming more fully integrated people who frequently develop in significant ways as a result of their group involvement.

We hope that the musings and vignettes we have shared will encourage students of gestalt therapy to explore further the fascinating realm of group process and to find for themselves the power of GGT in the facilitation of healing, integration, and growth.

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Hope, Envy, Illusion, and Reality in Analytic Group Therapy: An Essay and a Vignette

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In this article, the author discusses some ideas about the process of hope in relation to envy and illusion and hope's contextual position within "reality" in the analytic group therapy experience. He presents some thoughts on hope, envy, and illusion and then gives a clinical example of their dynamic appearance and treatment in a clinical group.

KEYWORDS: Illusion; fantasy; hope; envy; analytic group; time.

HOPE AND ITS DYNAMIC VICISSITUDES IN RELATION TO TIME

Hope is an important human experience. It gives us a reason for existence, a sense of, and anticipation for, the future, and a motivation to live out our ambitions and desires. It also serves as an organizing function, enabling us to place the past and the present in the context of a "to be lived" future. Some might say that it frees us from the emotional shackles of the effects, influences, and organizers of the past, such that the present becomes a springboard for the uncertain future rather than the repetitive certainty of a past to be lived again in the future. It reminds us that we can be pulled by the future, as well as influenced by the past, and that our present is a reconciliation and choice point within this perspective.² In hope, time is one's friend and not one's enemy (Brok, 2009).

A number of analytic writers, ranging from Loewald (1988) through Mitchell

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2 In a clinical discussion of identificatory trauma and the Holocaust, I (Brok, 2005) have noted that trauma disconnects and can dissolve a sense of future hope. This loss of future hope can even occur for nondirectly traumatized offspring of Holocaust survivors. However, a good enough group can help regenerate hope.