

Gestalt Therapy: 100 Key Points and Techniques by Dave Mann. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.

Is it really possible to take all of Gestalt therapy's wide-ranging experiential, existential, experimental, phenomenological, relational, situational, Eastern philosophical "self" and shape it with "good form" into just "*100 Key Points and Techniques*?" It is not easy,¹ but Dave Mann, the British Gestalt psychotherapist, supervisor, and trainer who dared to take on this daunting task, has done just that, leading us on an illuminating journey through the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy.

Mann's book covers the major concepts and practices of Gestalt therapy. Lively vignettes from his work, and experiential exercises, illustrate theoretical discussions for the reader. Aside from the valuable content, I was surprised to find that "*how*" he wrote the book intrigued me the most. His writing style embodies Gestalt values and practices and gives the reader, indirectly, an experience of what relating and knowing in a Gestalt way is like.

First, his writing style is *relational*: a conversational style, often using "we" and "us" and addressing the reader as "you," rather than always writing in the more distancing third person. He invites the reader to engage in *experiential* exercises to encourage *cocreation* of the learning (p. x). His respect for the uniqueness of each person's *experience* is revealed in his eloquent depiction of what each therapist must do to bridge our existential separateness:

I begin this book with the conundrum that faces every Gestalt therapist as they face fellow human beings in the therapy room. That in our individual uniqueness we can only ever get experience near to another, we can never completely and utterly comprehend the other's experience. To gain the best understanding possible of the other we need to appreciate the way they configure themselves in relation to the environment, the patterns they paint as they relate to their world and those they meet in their world, the way they shape and form their experience. How the individual forms and then moves on from one experience to another. (p. 3)

Mann is wary of the word "techniques" in the title, fearing it would feed into existing misconceptions that Gestalt is a collection of prescribed techniques. To prevent that assumption, he stresses throughout the book that the use of experiments or techniques must arise from the situation of the

¹Self-disclosure: I myself have been working on defining Gestalt terminology and practice in a different format (stephaniesabar.com), and know only too well how difficult it is to distill a complex concept down to two or three pages of clear and readable prose.

client in the therapeutic relationship. An experiment that emerged very subtly in the setting of his office demonstrates this point beautifully:

Lydia, a successful businesswoman, arrived for her initial therapy session with me with a forceful air. She strode into the room and perched herself firmly on the edge of the sofa, her erect posture accentuated by her pinstriped suit. She told me that she'd been in therapy before and had a working knowledge of different modalities. 'So tell me, what led you to consider therapy with a gestalt therapist?' I inquired. Her response was rapid, 'I want to be challenged!' To her surprise I invited her to lean back into the sofa, to feel her arm being supported, movements that she struggled to make. As she sat there stiffly resisting the support from the furniture I made a further inquiry. 'And what might be a challenge for you?' She smiled over a trembling bottom lip as her eyes began to water. (p. 127, emphasis in original)

Mann also demonstrates *self-disclosure*. His section on *developing supports* opens with his telling us of the supports he drew on while writing this book: fellow Gestalt writers, family, an old teacher, trainees to give feedback on the clarity of the writing, as well as physical exercise and playing a musical instrument (p. 216). In the section on *presence* he reveals that, while struggling to explain presence, he had a personal realization: "that I am dependent upon others' presence in order to make sense of my world. Their presence – actual, imagined or remembered – helps me make sense of my experience" (p. 181).

Mann's writing is literary, clear, and precise – an example of "*good form*" (cf. Zinker, 1994/1998). He has a gift for *metaphor*, finding that it "expands our capacity to convey our felt sense verbally" [and] "can add color, form, and texture to our verbal communication" (p. 135). "Use of metaphor," he says, "can create a dialogic bridge between us through which a level of understanding can be gained that transcends the words used" (p. 198). For example, he writes: "No two gestalt therapists will be the same but both will be recognizable as gestalt therapists. . . – when was the last time you saw *two identical oak trees*?" (p. xi, emphasis added). Another particularly illuminating metaphor speaks to the issue of support:

Another way of thinking of [support] is in terms of therapy as either *glue* or *solvent*. [When] I worked [...] in the mental health services with clients who were particularly fragile or fragmented, [...] I needed to adopt an adhesive approach [...] helping the client identify and stick the fragmented parts together. Conversely, if a client arrives with habituated ways of being that no longer match his current situation,

a more solvent approach may be indicated. (pp. 68-69, emphasis added)

A welcome characteristic of Mann's thinking is that, for the most part, he does not fall prey to the polarizations of early Gestalt theory and practice. He values Gestalt's predominant focus on the *here and now*. Yet, in the interest of the context and history in any situation, he insists that attention must also be given to *there and now*, *here and then*, and *there and then*. As he writes, "In a gestalt therapy session the above time/space zones weave in and out of each other. [...] The client [...] is part of a larger whole, part of a multitudinous field of relations." (pp. 5, 89, 92)

Writing on developmental theory, he dismisses Perls's outdated view of healthy development as "the transition from environmental support to self support," finding it "inconsistent with gestalt's situational view of self" (p. 114). Although many have criticized Gestalt for not having a developmental theory, Mann makes explicit how Gestalt's developmental theory has been there all along *implicitly*, flowing from its concepts of field theory (life space/situation), support, dialogue, confirmation, and creative adjustment (pp. 114-16, 184, 207-09).

In critiquing this otherwise admirable work, I have two small points to make, and a third that I consider a serious omission.

1. The word "selfing" (p. 18) bothers me. It adds an unnecessary layer of jargon to processes that are adequately described by existing terms, e.g., self as process, Gestalt experience cycle, self-functions, and creative adjustment.

2. I am also discomfited by his attempt to make *id* and *ego* parts of the Gestalt concept of *self* (p. 20). As Lynne Jacobs (2003) has commented, "I would [...] get rid of the terms 'Id' and 'Ego' altogether. The terms have long ago been abandoned by contemporary psychoanalysis as outdated relics of a non-relational, intrapsychic, drive-based theory of mind. Words [...] cannot be decontextualized and redefined at will" (p. 139).

3. Mann's section on *aggression* is, unfortunately, an unquestioning repetition of Perls's theory of positive and negative aggression (pp. 205-06). He makes no mention of Frank Staemmler's recent well-thought-out arguments against just about everything Perls has said about aggression.² Staemmler (2009) points out that, in contemporary psychology, aggression is *only a hostile* process, usually involving anger or rage. Its goal is to demean or harm another. What Perls characterizes as "positive" aggression is an entirely different category of behavior and motivation, which has to

²Staemmler's book, *Aggression, Time and Understanding: Contributions to the Evolution of Gestalt Therapy*, is listed in Mann's bibliography, so it is curious to why his new thinking about aggression was omitted.

do with assertiveness, curiosity, exploring, building, learning, mastering, etc. – a positive process of attraction to something of interest. Its goal is “to attain one’s own goal or safeguard one’s rights without harming or belittling another person” (Staemmler, p. 39)

Staemmler (2009) also finds dangerous Perls’s encouragement of the expression of anger and aggression in the punching of pillows or yelling aggressively at the other in an “empty chair.” Current research has shown that expressing aroused anger and aggression does *not* lead to catharsis. It actually *increases* rather than decreases subsequent aggression (Staemmler, pp. 62-67). Perls’s work with clients in expressing anger and aggression was also very individualistic, only for the benefit of the aggressor’s needs and not taking into account the other in the situation. “By no means can it be reconciled with Buber’s notion of ‘I-Thou’” (Staemmler, p. 30).

Still, I think this is a wonderful book, a much-needed up-to-date, comprehensive, and readable presentation of current Gestalt therapy theory and practice. Mann need not have worried about the danger of writing about “points and techniques” coming across as dry, prescribed recipes for therapy. His kind voice and great awareness of human beings’ struggles and existential condition come through and bring the book to a deep level of respect and understanding. I highly recommend it to all Gestalt students, trainees, trainers, teachers, therapists, psychologists of other orientations, and even clients. The general reader might benefit from it as well, since Gestalt is not just a therapy but also, as Mann shows us, a way of being.³

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³See Spinelli and Marshall (Eds.), *Embodied Theories*.