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Primitive Gestalts:

Early Developmental Patterns and Their Effect on Later Life

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Organismic Balance: Gestalt Formation and Destruction

The ongoing goal of all organisms, including humans, is the maintenance of homeostasis, where all systems are in balance. This is the basic ingredient for survival. Life, and the environment in which we experience life, is constantly changing. This places demands on the organism to notice the impact and determine what response is required to restore balance. The organism must continually adjust and act based on recognizing and meeting these needs, which may be physical or emotional.

Ultimately, all living systems are engaged in the continual process of detecting change and taking action to return to the place of balance. It is only from this place of balance that one can be fully present, the basic requirement for optimal living! Lack of awareness of any need results in the splitting off of a part of oneself that continues to seek completion. This splitting of attention results in an ever-increasing dysregulation with its concomitant symptom development.

In gestalt therapy, this ongoing process is referred to as gestalt formation and gestalt destruction (Perls, Hefer-line, & Goodman, 1951). It is the basis for organismic self-regulation. The greater the health of this process, the better the organismic self-regulation and functioning. Figure 1 illustrates the steps in this process.

Gestalt Formation: Awareness and Need Identification

Left to him- or herself, the healthy person becomes aware of any imbalance or discomfort being experienced. One of the keys to the success of this process is awareness. Awareness can be considered the moment-by-moment sensing of both the external and internal environments. In some cases it is referred to as "kinesthetic sensing" (Barker, 1978). It is this awareness—a tuning in to the body—that allows for the recognition of imbalance.

With the awareness of this imbalance, or discomfort, the organism continues the process with the determination of what is needed, and how it can get the need met to restore homeostasis. For example, on a physical level, the person might notice a discomfort in his or her stomach. As a result of instinct and previous experience, this is associated with hunger, the need for organic nourishment, the raw materials for the biological metabolic process. Interacting with the environment to acquire and then ingest food would then satisfy the need and restore a sense of balance.

Alternately, the uncomfortable feeling might be associated with an emotional imbalance, such as feelings surrounding the interaction with another person. Emotions have an energetic component and mobilize the body. Again, it is up to the individual to detect and identify this feeling in his or her body. The need would then be determined to be the expression of anger, hurt, or other feelings created during the interaction.

This is the gestalt formation, where a "figure" emerges from the "fertile void" or ground (Perls et al., 1951). It's our instinctual process of noticing and identifying a need, in order to engage with the environment to address and remediate the need. In the case of the activation of an emotion, its expression offers the opportunity to release the energy generated so that it does not have to be stored and held in the body.

Gestalt Destruction

By appropriate expression, interaction with the environment, incorporation, satisfaction, and return to balance, we

complete the process of gestalt destruction, when there is no longer any need for that particular figure to be maintained. One then returns to the fertile void state, the place of balance, where the organism is again open to detect new figure formation. Success of this process is necessary for aliveness and the ability to be present, since unmet needs result in a part of the organism splitting off in its continual motivation for completion.

Interruption of the Process

In looking at Figure 1, it is clear that interruption of the gestalt formation-destruction process can occur at any point: before awareness, before determination of need, before action, etc. In the above example of an emotional imbalance or feelings toward another person, the interruption may mean lack of awareness of the feeling, a determination that the feeling is not justified and therefore wrong, or some fear of the expression of the feeling. The chronic interference with the gestalt formation-destruction process can be considered a neurosis.

Any time there is an interruption in the process, we are left with unfinished business, an unmet need. Unfortunately, the expression "time heals all wounds" is not accurate. Unmet needs, unrecognized or unexpressed feelings, don't go away. They get stored and held in the body as tension. They must be addressed and resolved in order to achieve release and reach completion. Left unresolved, the result is that a part of the self becomes preoccupied with their completion and thus unavailable for a more present-centered focus. Furthermore, according to Reich and others, this process also results in physical armoring, or holding in of the emotion, leading to physical bracing and symptom development (Reich, 1948).

There are many reasons for the interruption of this gestalt process. After all, this is the basis for psychopathology and neurotic patterns. Perls might say, for example, that the person interrupts the expression of a feeling such as anger because he or she has introjected the rule that one shouldn't express or even feel anger. Frequently, angry feelings toward a parent are dismissed out of loyalty or due to the fears associated with the consequences of this anger, such as being rejected. For many, the rule against feeling angry creates an uncomfortable dissonance—the conflict between feeling anger and not being allowed to feel or express this anger. Over the course of development, this conflict may be resolved through another process, for example, that of deadening or numbing, where the interruption occurs so early in the gestalt process that the person is not even aware that he or she was ever angry. Or it may get handled through a process of splitting off, where awareness takes a detour when the person gets close to this sensitive area.

Primitive Gestalts

On one level, this appears to result in the interruption of gestalt formation-destruction. In other words, the natural process is never allowed to reach completion. But in fact, the interruption of this gestalt as well as many others can actually be traced back to attempts to deal with conflicts earlier in one's life. Thus, the process of deadening made it possible for the child to not notice feelings that couldn't be expressed or other feelings that were just too painful to experience.

These methods, which may be referred to as defenses, that the child unconsciously or even consciously learned in order to cope with double binds and other conflicts, can actually be considered a healthy gestalt formation process that took place during early development. This gestalt formation helped the child avoid being overwhelmed by pain, trauma, and any other type of emotional distress. This process is what I'm referring to as the formation of "primitive gestalts," or early attempts at completion based on a child's limited resources and sometimes untenable demands. And because primitive gestalts are formed so early in our development, they are much more resistant to change or even identification.

Ontological Development of Primitive Gestalts

Primitive gestalt formation, therefore, develops out of a child's need to understand, master, and manage his or her early environment for the instinctual purpose of survival. At this stage of development, we may consider two primary reinforcers: tension reduction and attachment formation. Instead of a general interaction with the environment to secure one's needs through self-efficacy, the process is focused around getting one's primary interface with the environment—one's caretaker—to provide for one's needs. Furthermore, satisfaction of many of the needs themselves are caretaker provided, such as acceptance, approval, and love. In this process the child is at the mercy of the rules, emotional needs, and idiosyncrasies of the caregiver.

If the caregiver becomes uncomfortable or distressed with the child's

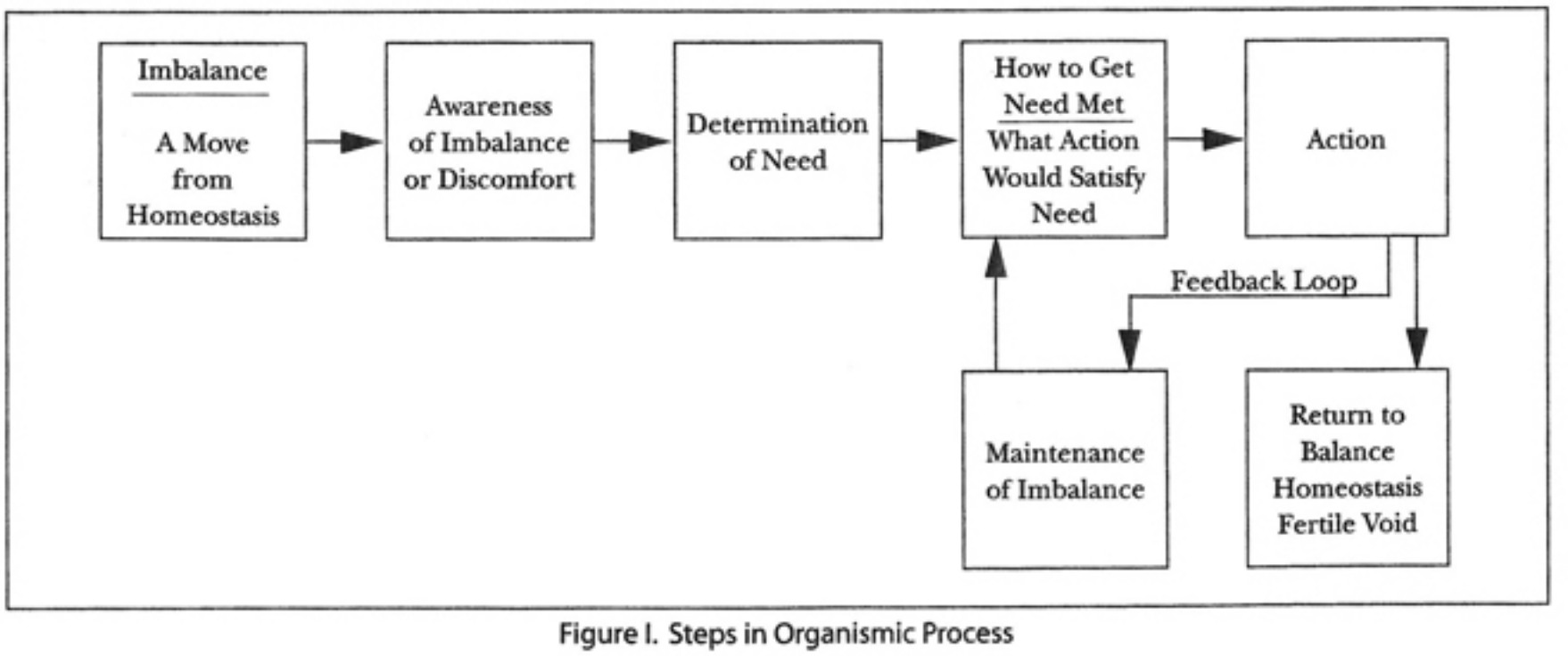


Figure I. Steps in Organismic Process

emotional expression or needs, a sensitive child may learn to deny his or her own emotions and emotional needs to please or to avoid upsetting the caregiver. Alice Miller discusses this so well when she talks about the drama of the gifted child (Miller, 1979). If it is not okay to express or even have certain feelings such as sadness or anger, it would then be very uncomfortable for this child to feel or notice such unacceptable reactions. The establishment of a primitive gestalt becomes complete when the child develops a mechanism, such as deadening or splitting, so that he or she no longer even notices that the emotion is there. This primitive gestalt formation may also include an inordinate sensitivity to the caregiver's facial expressions and consequently the facial expressions of others in the child's social environment.

PGs therefore are actually the organism's early attempt at completion, of achieving or assuring survival—through maintenance of a good relationship with caregiver—and of assuaging emotional/physical discomfort. Unfortunately, this gestalt formation process is in reaction to the demands and reinforcing aspects of the childhood environment and the caregiver's behaviors. The PGs being formed—including the suppression of behaviors and emotions that are not acceptable, or the denial of needs where their attempted satisfaction is met with frustration or worse—may ultimately be stifling for healthy adult development.

Said another way, optimally responding to childhood environmental requirements may result in the denial of one's needs, in the service of overcoming or managing a more immediate demand. Therefore, the development of long-term efficacy or effective living strategies is sacrificed in the service of immediate survival needs: staying in good standing with the caregiver and discomfort reduction. In short, the child learns to adapt to a system that may be significantly skewed in terms of what works or what is punished.

This development of habitual patterns has always been a part of the gestalt therapeutic underpinnings. Indeed, the notion of origins of neurotic tendencies is a part of most clinical psychological approaches. But it is typically referred to as a process. As Greenwald (1976) indicates, once a person becomes aware of these "archaic responses" and takes some risks, he or she discovers more effective attitudes and behaviors.

The problem is that even after these discoveries, the old patterns persist. The new behaviors, although so much more effective, have great difficulty taking hold, if they are able to do so at all. The old patterns have, in fact, such a pull on an organism that I refer to this as a "gravitational pull." This pull is so strong that even after considerable psychic and behavioral efforts to change, one typically is pulled back into the orbit of the primitive gestalt.

Primitive gestalts can also be likened to the structure of atoms and molecules. In the atomic structure, there is always the intrinsic need for balance between protons and electrons. An atom that is missing an electron will bind to another atom that has an extra electron to form a stable molecule. This molecule will be very resistant to change, as it is complete. A primitive gestalt creates a similar closure and is resistant to new patterns.

Structure of Pattern Formation

I am suggesting that by assuring survival—the management of emotional pain, and the goal of attachment by the developing child (even the illusion of attachment)—these primitive gestalts take on the qualities of a closed psychological structure. In fact, the development of PGs may result in more than simply a psychological structure and actually influence neurostructural modification and development, triggered and literally designed by a person's interface with his or her childhood environment and most particularly, the mother-child interface. In part, this process would also include the selective decay of neuronal pathways that do not get reinforced, those that either are not fruitful or those that are punished or simply not part of that person's reality of the world.

How does this structure develop? There is considerable research demonstrating that neural structural development is sensitive to environmental influences (Diamond, 1976; Schore, 1994). In fact, Schore and others (Haracz, 1985) have suggested that early childhood environmental factors serve as regulators of brain development and that dendritic growth is sensitive to these experiences (Greenough, 1987).

Imprinting is the process whereby early experience establishes more or less permanent patterns within the nervous system. This has been variously described as creating a template (Stadden, 1983) or "stamping" of early experience upon the developing nervous system (Schore, 1994). This process has been suggested to be the foundation of the mother-child attachment bond formation. Furthermore, Kandel and Schwartz (1985) discuss how the development of social competence may involve this process of imprinting.

Structural maturation of the cortex occurs primarily postnatally. The development of the child's neurobiology is overwhelmingly influenced by the mother-infant interactions (Schore, 1994). Similarly, emotions are initially regulated by others, with the child gradually taking over self-regulation of this function. This is supported by the appropriate brain growth. The key ingredient in the way that this growth takes place is the influence of the mother-child interaction, and later, other social interactions.

One of the key ingredients in the developing brain is its periodic reorganization at more complex levels. This process, indeed all neurological development in relationship to its environment, appears to involve a Darwinian survival mechanism along with the pruning back of unnecessary connections. Schore refers to a "parcellation" process, a competitive elimination of excess axons of the cerebral cortex. Ebbesson (1980) suggests that this type of process may be responsible for imprinting. In other words, the reinforcement and strengthening of one set of neuronal connections is accompanied by the parcellation or elimination of other circuits. I suggest that it is also the process that establishes the complex system of a primitive gestalt.

We can further speculate that in the process of primitive gestalt development, those patterns that reduce awareness of emotional tension, such as somehow not noticing the anger or numbing oneself to the emotional pain caused by a mother's inappropriate behavior, are reinforced and other potential pathways are pruned back. Ironically, this process ultimately results in the unconscious buildup of physical tension. The neural pathways representing the primitive gestalt are therefore imprinted, while other potential pathways become less viable. These neuronal modifications become almost permanent.

I would further suggest that this process of neurological shaping is responsible for people's senses of themselves and their templates of the world

around them. These neuronal pathways that survive then determine later on what "feels right" to the person. In other words, by matching one's experience with the imprinted template, experience becomes acceptable or not. How we compare experience to our internal template is the basis for our "intuitive" sense, which thus becomes fixed with a maladaptive bias.

If such a structural developmental process occurs in the formation and later employment of primitive gestalts, it would set up a template through which subsequent thoughts and emotional reactions would be compared and filtered. This would explain why we tend to integrate experiences that fit with our view of the world and ourselves, and deny, or explain away, those that do not match the template, no matter how logical the experiences may be. The result is the continual validation and reinforcement of the imprint, or PG, and the ongoing rejection of experiences that do not match or fit, making it that much more difficult to break away from the status quo.

Frequently in therapy, the client will know intellectually what is right but will reject it, saying, "It doesn't feel right," or he or she may resist trying something new, because "that's not me." I suggest that this "feeling" the client is referring to is the comparing, to determine whether it fits, with his or her primitive gestalt. Only those experiences that feel like they are in attunement with the internal template—the client's PGs—are accepted.

It is a similar subtle feeling that frequently is responsible for persons thinking that they are not wanted, or that someone doesn't like them. It is an expectation born out of the crucible of their early experiences that has become solidified in a primitive gestalt.

The primitive gestalt that I am describing can actually be considered a person's internal representation, a working model, of the most salient aspects of the world. This would include how safe, abundant, and predictable the world is. Life experiences then are matched to this representation to determine their familiarity while expectations are established based on these primitive gestalts.

Retroflection and the Body

Retroflection is a good illustration of the consequences of a primitive gestalt, an early unhealthy gestalt formation. It also clearly demonstrates how PGs are intimately connected to and influence the body. Retroflection is the process whereby one does to oneself what one would like to do to another person, but can't allow oneself to do. This occurs when the directing of certain energies outward in an attempt to manipulate the environment to meet one's need is negatively reinforced, i.e., punished or otherwise frustrated. As a result, that energy is redirected and turned inward. The energy needs to go somewhere, but the primary target is off limits. In other words, the environment, typically other persons, proves hostile to one's efforts to satisfy one's needs. The need could be the expression of a feeling such as anger, or it could be the action to acquire a desired goal, such as parental acknowledgement.

Punishment doesn't annihilate the need, but teaches the person to hold back the punishable response. The impulse or the wish remains as strong as ever and, since this is not satisfied, it is constantly organizing the motor apparatus, the person's posture, pattern of muscular tonus, and embryonic movements, in the service of overt expression. But at the same time, the person acts to suppress it. So the organismic energy is actually divided. The result is that, not only is the behavior turned inward, but also the person actually struggles against itself. As Perls once said, "The doer becomes done to!"

Because this pattern results in the avoidance of punishment or other negative outcome, it becomes fixed as an effective pattern, part of the primitive gestalt that achieves the primary need of avoiding emotional pain, the disapproval of the caregiver, and possible rejection. At the same time, it's a pattern that interferes with full expression and satisfaction.

Even when we simply withhold the emotional response, the body literally has to "hold" itself to keep the building energy inside. This holding solidifies into body armoring patterns (Reich, 1948). The result is ongoing tension that results in fatigue, postural challenges, impaired performance, and possibly musculoskeletal pain. This is the basis for psychosomatic illnesses.

Resistance of Primitive Gestalts to Change

So, primitive gestalts serve to bind psychic and physiological energy. Their success in binding this energy, reducing awareness of tension, and presumably insuring survival makes them difficult to let go of. As I noted above, primitive gestalts might actually be imprinted in the brain, including the selective decay of neuronal systems not involved in the primitive gestalt. We can go back to the analogy of the chemical process described above and think of the stable molecule where protons and electrons are evenly balanced. This stable molecule is very resistant to being altered. The primitive gestalt formation establishes, in a sense, a stable psychological molecule, which, like the chemical molecule, is complete and resistant to disruption. Thus, like the chemical reactions, in the transition from primitive gestalt to healthy gestalt formation, there is uncertainty and discomfort before the new gestalts are formed. The very stability of primitive gestalts insures their resistance to modification. The process of imprinting and selective neurobiological pruning further strengthens the pattern while reducing the neural networks of other potential pathways and reducing the brain's flexibility.

A prime example of a response to fear of rejection and avoidance of pain is the client who is unable to make real contact with another person (such as the therapist). By not making contact, this person avoids the anxiety and fear that would be present in the contact, but at the same time never experiences the excitement of the potential relationship. The important point for this discussion is that this primitive gestalt locks the person into a process that is, essentially, a dead end, limiting growth and development through the identification of present-centered needs.

Spoon Fed

As noted, primitive gestalts develop in relation to the support and mirroring experienced during childhood. Perls frequently referred to how individuals' growth is inhibited by developing manipulative ways to get the environment to meet their needs. He referred to people as being spoon fed, receiving too much environmental support. The result is that the child is rarely frustrated, and frustration is an important ingredient in finding one's own support. Instead, the child develops a dependency on others for support. Energy therefore goes into ways of manipulating the environment in order to continue to get one's needs met, instead of using that energy to take appropriate risks as part of the learning process. Along the path of least resistance, and

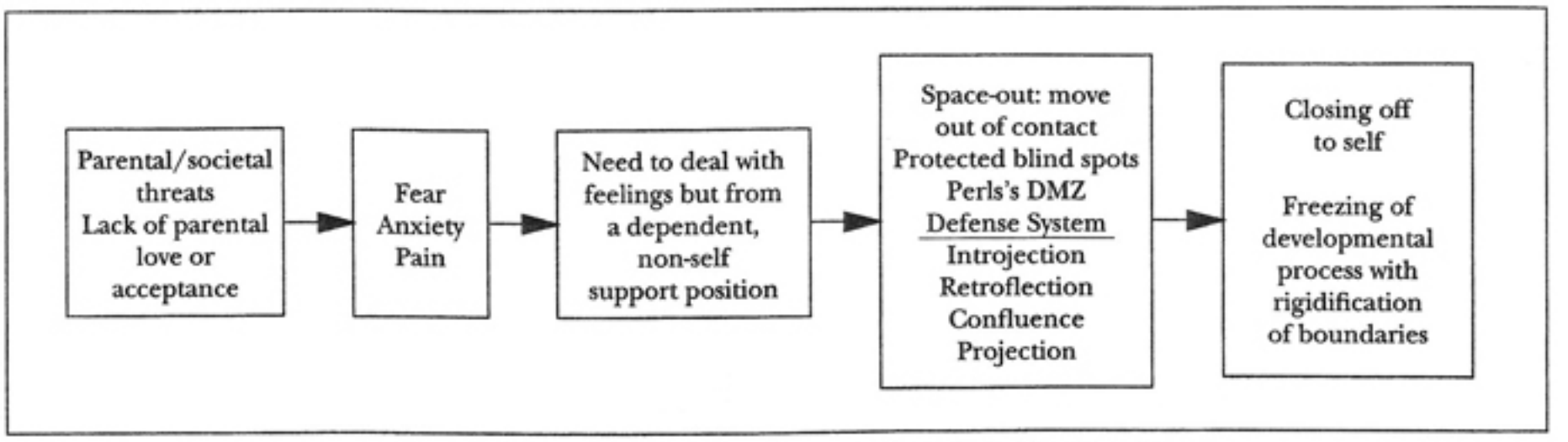


Figure 2. Developmental Process in Formation of Primitive Gestalts

with their success, these manipulations become primitive gestalts.

The child whose cries are regularly reinforced with the desired object doesn't learn how to engage in healthy behaviors to self-satisfy. In fact, that child might not even learn that taking small and appropriate risks can be rewarding. Instead, such children develop the pattern of complaining or expecting someone else to take care of them. This pattern is developed with the complicity of caregivers, whose own discomfort with emotions results in the avoidance of their or their children's emotional discomfort. More recently, this pattern has been labeled as co-dependency. This primitive gestalt results in rigid behavioral boundaries, since new behaviors are not engaged in. It results in more or less fixed boundaries between what is "me" versus what is "not me."

Thwarted Goals: Case Example J. M. Primitive gestalts are also established out of a very different type of developmental history. As mentioned above, when the engagement of healthy behaviors to satisfy needs is thwarted, the energy gets redirected. In a previous example we described the resulting retroflection. Another scenario in the development of primitive gestalts is exemplified by J. M., who, as a child, was not shown much love. The unconscious messages she picked up from her parents were, "You don't do it right," "I don't love you," "You get in our way," and "You're not wanted."

J. M. learned to cope with the abusive elements of her parents' behavior by becoming, as she noted, invisible. She would find locations in her house that were less frequented, and stand quietly, hoping not to be noticed. Satisfying this need to be invisible was successful enough to get incorporated as part of her primitive gestalt.

Rather than too much environmental support, she received little or no support. Indeed, she recalls her mother even suggesting that she picked up the wrong child at the hospital, because J. M. was so different from her mother. J. M. needed to deal with feelings of rejection, of not being loved, and of feeling worthless. One way to achieve closure—respite from the emotional pain—was through the unconscious determination that she needed simply to try harder: "I'm just not good enough. If only I did it better, I'd get the love I need." Instead of the devastating reality—acknowledging that the parent was incapable of giving what is needed—J. M. took on the burden of doing more, doing it better, and ultimately, when nothing else worked, doing it perfectly. This determination of needing to achieve perfection and of not being good enough was imprinted into her primitive gestalt. What it did was maintain the possibility of getting the love from the parent and assuaging the pain of hopelessness, at least temporarily, and allow her to maintain the fantasy of family.

At the same time, this primitive gestalt established a sense of her inadequacy, of not being good enough for the parent's love. This assessment of not deserving interrupted potential goal-seeking behaviors on a regular basis for J. M. This interruption was in the service of avoiding expected disappointments or failure. As one can see, this pattern tends to short circuit behaviors that might lead to the achievement of certain goals and fulfilling needs. It also resulted in the client always putting others ahead of herself.

Figure 2 diagrams this developmental process of primitive gestalt formation. A childhood environment that does not offer the appropriate level of support, eliciting emotional pain, fear, and anxiety, motivates a protective response that somehow serves the purpose of managing the discomfort. Due to its success, this process gains validity and stature in the defensive mechanisms of the individual. As noted previously, a neuroanatomical pattern of the primitive gestalt becomes imprinted—with competing neuronal pathways losing the competitive battle. The success of this pattern subsequently interferes with the healthy process of gestalt formation-destruction. We learn behaviors that are appropriate as part of the primitive gestalt because they get us through our childhood distress, but lock us into an ultimately maladaptive pattern.

As mentioned above, PGs stay with us and are very difficult to transform because they bind emotionally uncomfortable psychic energy. They are a refuge in a fierce emotional storm triggered by some aspect of the child's environment. Then, because they worked for our perceived survival, they get wired in almost as strongly as our genetic instincts. We don't tamper with patterns that insure our version of survival. Furthermore, they become our internal cognitive and emotional filter, through which new experience is compared to previous experience.

If we conceptualize the brain as operating within a chaotic, non-linear dynamic or complexity model, these primitive gestalts can be considered "attractor states." An attractor state is a bias in the system, where certain patterns have an attraction that makes them more likely to occur. As such, it acts like a magnet, inordinately attracting whatever is around it.

It is the establishment and ongoing primacy of primitive gestalts that cause the interruption of the healthy gestalt formation-destruction process. I would also suggest that those who interrupt earlier in the process, i.e., toward the left side of Figure 1, have more rigidi-

fied primitive gestalts that were created at earlier stages in their developmental history. As a result, their self-support systems may be more infantile.

Treatment Implications of the Primitive Gestalt Model: Case Example F. H.

In my early clinical training, I learned not to hold expectations of change by the client. This mitigates ongoing frustration as clients understand what's going on and yet appear helpless to alter patterns that are clearly maladaptive. The inertia, or the gravitation pull, that draws one, like a rubber band, back to the primitive gestalt can appear willful, stubborn, or rebellious if one fails to realize the ground within which this attractor state was formed. It is therefore important to realize how centrally the primitive gestalt sits within a person's psyche. For the person engaged in this healing process, it is almost impossible to objectively observe and evaluate the very part of oneself that is doing the observing.

So, to begin with, this process must take into account the imprinting characteristics and self-validating aspects of the primitive gestalt's internal filter. When the primitive gestalt is the dominant model and internal representation of the self and the world, it is not possible to trust one's center. As noted previously, what "feels right" is based on old patterns. I frequently use the analogy of aiming and shooting at a target. You line up the sights perfectly to hit the bulls-eye, but the shot consistently hits three feet to the side. So one part of the process is to acknowledge the poor yet consistent results of the present "aiming" system—one aspect of the primitive gestalt. I refer to this inaccurate aiming as a person's unconscious strategy.

Cognitive recognition is not sufficient to shift patterns, but can be more effectively utilized in the overall process. Our ability to become unconscious as a way of dealing with dissonance—the discrepancy between our approach and its lack of effectiveness—typically serves to ignore our poor aim, our failed strategy. So, awareness of this discrepancy becomes important. But we can go one step further and hold ourselves *accountable* for the poor aim. This means to maintain the awareness that the present strategy does not work in achieving our goals.

The gestalt therapy process of using the "empty chair" is a particularly effective technique for separating from this template or framework and gaining some objectivity—another perspective. This approach creates a dialogue between two aspects of oneself. Perls frequently referred to the struggle between one's top dog and underdog, where the top dog may badger the person with "shoulds" and put-downs. The gestalt process addresses the top dog through this "empty chair" process whereby a client shuttles between two seats representing two opposing aspects of his or her personality, in this case the top dog and underdog.

In many respects this top dog position represents the primitive gestalt. But the primitive gestalt holds more than simply the introjects of childhood that Perls referred to. It also incorporates one's own decision, whether conscious or unconscious, of how the world works and what works best for one's own survival. It is not simply bad information—it contains *true representations* of what was most effective as a child.

Separating this primitive gestalt and placing it outside of oneself in the empty chair offers the opportunity to begin objectifying this gestalt to begin seeing its faulty patterns in present-day life. It offers the client the chance to acknowledge that this perspective cannot meet his or her needs.

The separate chairs also offer the chance to begin identifying and supporting the non-primitive gestalt aspects of self. Here too, it's not the underdog that Perls described as more passive-aggressive and attempting to fight back from a place that lacked support. Instead, we place in this other chair the part that we are attempting to uncover, a part of the client that can see clearly and that does "know" the truth, even if this is only an intellectual awareness. If we think in terms of neural templates or an imprinting of the primitive gestalt, the identifying of this second position can inaugurate the development of a second, competing neural system, the development of a second attractor state.

F. H. was a woman who presented with panic attacks. She grew up in a symbiotic relationship with a borderline mother who was intrusive, demanding, controlling, self-absorbed, and moody. F. H. could be yelled at unexpectedly. She dealt with this abusive environment by describing her mother as high-strung and always trying to anticipate how her mother would feel and react. She experienced tension and anxiety not knowing how her mother would react from moment to moment along with fears of possible rejection by her mother. She dealt with this behavior, disappointment, and emotional pain by splitting off from her emotions to avoid what would have been overwhelming hopelessness.

Aspects of F. H's primitive gestalt included: a) splitting off of awareness of feelings, b) a sense of not being good enough, with its corollary, "I need to be perfect"—thus worrying about mistakes, c) lack of trust in an orderly world—the world as scary and unpredictable, d) lack of trust in her own intuitive sense, since she had blocked her access to this part of herself, and e) an issue with personal boundaries, resulting in an inordinate sensitivity toward and responsibility for others' feelings. She also developed the patterns of breath holding, muscular contraction, and uncomfortable adrenalin rushes associated with uncertainty.

She attempted to control her situation by becoming perfect and ultimately by taking responsibility for her mother's emotions, and subsequently, the emotions of others. This was part of her continued futile attempt to get what she needed from her mother. By putting the responsibility on herself, and not her mother, she kept her hopes alive and hid her anger toward her mother. Her primitive gestalt involved her need to love her mother and maintain an image of a good relationship and having a good mother—in short, a sense of normalcy. This PG included her not feeling the emotional pain of how she was treated, along with the loss of what she didn't get from her mother and her childhood. But this PG mechanism of not noticing feelings, identified as "a" above, was a pattern that caused her to split off and not notice feelings with other people as well.

F. H. managed this until the stresses of two children strained her ability to cope and she began experiencing panic attacks on the freeway as her underlying emotions began to surface.

The panic attacks motivated F. H. to reexamine her life. Images of her mother yelling at her as a child, in the car, where there was no place to run or hide, began surfacing. These were very emotionally distressing and F. H. first responded with extreme discomfort and the need to stop the process that was too painful and scary. This was the threat to her primitive gestalt.

Gradually, the client realized through the therapeutic process that a) she could handle the emerging feelings, b) it was okay to have these feelings, and c) avoiding the feelings kept her panic attacks alive. The more difficult issues that she tackled were that she could be angry with her mother and still love her and that she could never do enough to change who her mother was and the basic dynamics of the relationship. This resulted in her full expression of feelings of hurt, sadness, loss, and anger.

An important part of this process was for the client to identify the parts of herself that were not part of the primitive gestalt and that could be placed in the empty chair opposite the primitive gestalt. She identified these parts as her toughness, the seeker, and how she loved others. These were good starting points in the development of a second attractor state as the counterpoint to the primitive gestalt.

With emotional abuse in childhood, it is more difficult to identify parts of oneself of which one has more than just an intellectual awareness. It helps to employ certain techniques. One that I find very useful is for a person to imagine his or her own gifts or accomplishments in a child or a friend. I would then ask a client, "What would you say to (the friend or child) if that person had this accomplishment, or skill, or talent?" Typically, the client would respond much more positively and this would open the door to a greater appreciation of self.

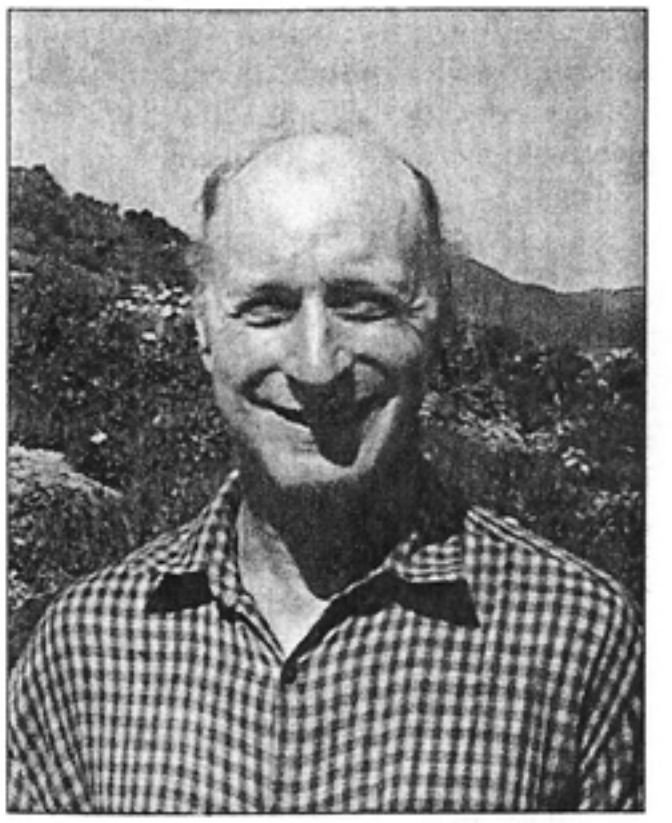
Similarly, when the client would be overly self-critical regarding some mistake, I would use this same approach: "What would you say to your child if he or she did this?" Again, the mistake would not appear nearly as terrible and this would begin to create perspective. I refer to this process as reality testing. I also explain it as part of the development of a healthy internal parent, who comes from a place of love, support, constructive input, and healthy boundary setting. This process begins to strengthen the development of this second position, one in which the client is more objective as well as more supportive and loving toward himself or herself.

Finding this objective place is so important because it creates a space for the client to listen to new information with "new ears" or see with "new eyes" some of his or her past and present successes. As mentioned previously, the ongoing dilemma of primitive gestalts is that they result in the selective acceptance of information and interpret information in a way that reinforces the established bias, while denying or explaining away positive events that could alter the primitive gestalt perspective. By opening a place to begin accepting one's positive aspects, the development of a healthier internal gestalt is accelerated.

While I am proposing that primitive gestalts are imprinted and thus very resistant to change, it is also true that the brain has significant properties of plasticity. We are just now realizing the full extent of this plasticity that includes neuroanatomical changes to psychosocial stimulation referred to as psychosocial genomics (Rossi, 2002; Siegel, 2005). This involves the expression of genes, such as immediate early genes, that respond to experience and cues in an adaptive manner within minutes. This experience-dependent development results in the synthesis of proteins producing neurogenesis in the brain that encodes new memory, learning, and behavior.

I find it useful during the therapeutic process to refer to the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970). This theory places emphasis on the need to accept *what is*, in order for change to occur. The premise is that one can only be in one place at a time. As I work with a client, I might draw a line that I describe as the client's path, his or her journey in life. I will say, "We know from physics that you can only be in one place at a time. You are here right now (identifying one point on the line), yet you say you *should* be here (pointing to a second point further along the line). It's an attempt at denying who you are in order to be someone else. Real change can only come from an acceptance and development of your true self. The fastest way to reach this second point is to accept that you are currently at this first point." This helps to further challenge the primitive gestalt, since it is made up of admonitions to be different than one is.

As part of the primitive gestalt noted above, F. H. tended to hold her breath, engage in musculoskeletal bracing, and experience adrenalin surges. A complementary process of relaxation training along with biofeedback was incorporated into the treatment. Here again, the goals were to establish and strengthen a new, healthy internal gestalt. By training a more optimal breathing pattern and having the client practice this pattern, we were reinforcing the new gestalt that included a sense of comfort and calmness in her body. The use of biofeedback to become more aware of muscular tensing, and training the release of this tension, also encouraged a new muscle memory. It all contributed to a new pattern that incorporated physical, emotional, and cognitive components.



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The awareness of muscle bracing also served as a cue, a signal that she was engaged in or coming from her primitive gestalt position. She then used the learned technique of differentiating her present world from her childhood world to acknowledge that conditions were different and that she was different. This would be followed by appropriate breathing and release of tension.

Another way of conceptualizing this process is to think in terms of the balance of power between the primitive gestalt and the new, healthy gestalt strategy that is first starting to take root. At first, the primitive gestalt has all the power, with the new, healthy perspective playing a very passive role. The goal is to gradually shift this power into the new internal position. Said another way, the goal is for the client to begin experiencing his or her "center" in the newly developing attractor state.

Primitive gestalts always develop within the context of dependency. Clients will typically begin a dialogue be-

tween these two parts by asking the primitive gestalt part of themselves to stop being abusive or demanding. etc. Another objective here is to help the new gestalt, the new "I," stop asking and begin telling the entrenched part that it will no longer stand for its behavior. In other words, an objective is for the new center to take a more active, assertive role.

At this point, I help my client take an active role in what I refer to as "stalking" the primitive gestalt—staying on its tail, noticing its behavior, and not allowing it to take control. It is at this point that the client will begin to recognize that the balance of power has shifted and the new attractor state will survive and thrive.

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