

Chapter 12: Gestalt Psychology

Dr. Rick Grieve

The Gestalt Revolt

- ◆ History
 - Occurred at the same time as the Behavioral revolution in the U.S.
 - In Germany
 - Focused on the elementistic nature of Wundt's work
 - Gestalt psychologists accepted the value of consciousness while criticizing the attempt to reduce it to atoms or elements
 - Gestalt psychologists maintained that when elements are combined they form a new pattern or configuration
 - Wundt also had this concept in his research
- ◆ Antecedent Influences on Gestalt Psychology
 - Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
 - When we perceive objects, we encounter mental states that appear to be composed of bits and pieces
 - These bits and pieces are not organized through mechanical process of association but rather the mind will form a whole experience
 - Perception is not a passive process but an active one
 - Franz Brentano
 - Proposed that psychology study the act of experiencing rather than the components of experience
 - Ernst Mach (1838-1916)
 - *The Analysis of Sensations* (1885)
 - Christian von Ehrenfels (1859-1932)
 - proposed that there are qualities of experience that cannot be explained as combinations of sensory elements
 - These he called *Gestalt qualitates*: perceptions based on something greater than a merging of individual sensations
- ◆ Antecedent Influences on Gestalt Psychology
 - William James
 - Regarded elements of consciousness as artificial abstractions
 - Stated that people see objects as wholes, not as bundles of sensations
 - **Phenomenology**
 - An approach to knowledge based on an unbiased description of immediate experience as it occurs, not analyzed or reduced to elements
- ◆ The Changing Zietgeist in Physics
 - Physics was becoming less atomistic at the end of the 19th century
 - Accepted the idea of **fields of force**
 - Physicists were starting to describe organic whole
 - Gestalt psychologists were reflecting the new physics
- ◆ The Phi Phenomenon: A Challenge to Wundtian Psychology
 - Gestalt psychology grew out of a field study by Max Wertheimer conducted in 1910
 - Wertheimer's research problem involved perceiving apparent movement when no actual movement has taken place
 - He referred to this as the "impression" of movement
 - If you have a light in a dark room shining on the wall and you switch it off and a second light on quickly enough, the light looks as if it has moved
 - **Phi phenomenon**: the illusion that two stationary flashing lights are moving from one place to another
 - Problem for Wundt:
 - According to Wundt, if you introspected, you should see two successive lights, but no matter how hard one introspected, couldn't see it
- ◆ Max Wertheimer (1880-1943)
 - Began Gestalt movement and influenced those who came after
- ◆ Kurt Koffka (1886-1941)

- Most inventive of Gestalt’s founders
- Presented the basic concepts of Gestalt psychology in the article, *Perception: An Introduction to Gestalt-Theorie* (1922)
- ◆ Wolfgang Kohler (1887-1967)
 - Spokesperson for the Gestalt movement
 - Suggested that Gestalt theory was a general law of nature that should be extended to all sciences
 - Noted that the word *Gestalt* in German has two uses
 - Refers to general properties that can be expressed in such terms as angular or symmetrical and describes characteristics such as triangularity in geometry and tempo in melody
 - Denotes a whole or concrete entity that has as one attribute a specific shape or form
 - Thus, Gestalt can be used to refer to objects as well as their characteristic forms

Ontology of Gestalt Psychology

- ◆ Phi phenomenon
- ◆ **Perceptual constancies:** a quality of wholeness or completeness in perceptual experience that does not vary when the sensory elements change
- ◆ Principle of perceptual organization
 - We perceive objects in the same way that we perceive apparent motion-as unified wholes rather than clusters of individual sensations
 - These are the rules by which we organize our perceptual world
 - Perceptual organization occurs automatically whenever we sense different shapes and patterns
 - The brain is a dynamic system in which all elements at any given time interact
 - Perceptual organizational principles
 - *Proximity:* parts that are close together in time or space appear to belong together and tend to be perceived together
 - *Continuity:* there is a tendency in our perception to follow a direction, to connect the elements in such a way that makes them seem continuous or flowing in a particular direction
 - *Similarity:* similar parts tend to be seen together as forming a group
 - *Closure:* there is a tendency in our perception to complete incomplete figures, to fill in the gaps
 - *Simplicity:* we tend to organize perceptions into the object being looked at and the background against which it appears

Learning

- ◆ Gestalt studies of learning: Insight and the mentality of apes
 - Interpreted results in terms of the whole situation and the relationships among the stimuli
 - Considered problem-solving to be a matter of restructuring the perceptual field
 - **Insight:** immediate apprehension or understanding of relationships
 - Productive thinking in humans
 - Thinking is done in terms of wholes
 - The whole problem must dominate the parts
 - Problem-solving should proceed from the whole problem downward, not the reverse
 - This idea challenged traditional educational practices, such as mechanical drill and rote learning, which derived from the associationist approach

Epistemology of Gestalt Psychology

- ◆ Examined the world through wholes-whole problem, whole consciousness, whole environment
- ◆ **Isomorphism**
 - The doctrine that there is a correspondence between psychological or conscious experience and the underlying brain experience
 - Wanted a theory that dealt with the underlying brain mechanisms involved with perceived Gestalts
 - Cerebral cortex was depicted as a dynamic system, in which the elements active at a given time interact
 - Perception is like a map

The Spread of Gestalt Psychology

- ◆ By the mid-1920s, the Gestalt movement was a coherent, dominate force in Germany
- ◆ After Nazis seized power in 1933, their anti-intellectualism, anti-Semitism and repressive actions forced the leaders of the Gestalt movement to leave the country and emigrate to the U.S.
- ◆ Began to publish materials in the U.S.
 - Harry Helson published a series of articles on Gestalt psychology in the *American Journal of Psychology*
 - Wasn't widely accepted in the U.S.
 - At odds with behaviorism
 - Not many people spoke German
 - Many psychologists believed that Gestalt psychology only dealt with perception
 - Founders ended up in small colleges where they could not train students of their own

Kurt Lewin (1890-1947)

- ◆ **Field Theory**
 - Field theory arose within psychology as a counterpart to the concept of force fields in physics
 - Lewin applied the idea of fields of force to explain behavior in terms of one's fields of social influences
 - **The Life Space**
 - Lewin described human behavior within its total physical and social context
 - A person's psychological activities occur within a kind of psychological field, which he called the life space
 - Life space encompasses all past, present, and future events that might affect us
 - Each of these events determines behavior in a given situation
 - Shows development as we age
 - Topological maps
- ◆ **Motivation**
 - basic state of balance between person & environment
 - any disturbance leads to tension
 - leads to action to relieve tension and restore balance

◆

- ◆ Zeigarik Effect
 - Bluma Zeigarik's experiment
- ◆ Social Psychology

References

- Kendler, H. H. (1987). *Historical foundations of modern psychology*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Schultz, D. P., & Schultz, S. E. (1996). *A history of modern psychology* (6th edition). Ft. Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Publishers.
- Schultz, D. P., & Schultz, S. E. (2004). *A history of modern psychology* (8th edition). Ft. Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Publishers.