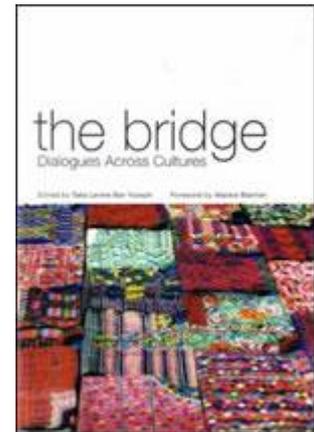


Book reviews

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Like a number of folks grandfathered into being an interculturalist, I started in a different field, in my case psychology with a focus on small group work. It was my privilege to have won a fellowship in 1976 led me to becoming certified as a Gestalt therapist under the tutelage of Erv and Miriam Polster in San Diego.

It was the bloom of the human potential movement, and we grandfathers and grandmothers in diversity and intercultural training brought toolboxes from our day jobs to these new fields. At this same time there was an incipient awareness of the importance of ethnic and gender culture in therapy itself. Therapists were waking up to the fact that they were unconsciously serving as agents of acculturation, that helping clients to “fit in” to dominant cultural patterns was often equated with healing. Latinos, for example, were almost automatically being diagnosed as co-dependent and treated as such.

Gestalt therapy offered a theoretical base with powerful tools of dialogue and role playing to contexts where hidden inner biases could be explored along with reactions to each other’s external behavior. Shuttling between figure and ground could be used to effect change in both the individual and corporate mentality. Unfortunately, the use of Gestalt and other human potential techniques became too soon constrained due to reactions to what some trainees saw their invasiveness of privacy. Certainly there were cases of abuse and ham-handed application of the newly developed resources, Mistakes were made and ethics transgressed. But, in the end it was the increasingly litigious environment of the workplace environment regarding verbal and non-verbal contact that prevented the further development and application of many promising techniques in organizational training. I often felt as if I were expected to function with my right hand tied behind my back. Little by little, many of these resources dried up in everyday practice.

So seeing *The Bridge* announced by Mackie Blanton was an opportunity to reconnect. Blanton’s foreword to the book situates Gestalt in its professional, academic and social consequences, while the book itself is skillfully and interactively edited by Talia Levine Bar-Joseph who is also a major contributor. Hers was more than the editor’s usual job of assembling, ordering, editing and proofing. The authors and the editor interacted actively, examining not only their subject matter but also reflecting together on the quality and learnings of their writing collaboration. Such reflection on work has traditionally been an

important dimension of Gestalt professional exchange. It is a high level learning form that I wish were imitated by interculturalists who might more frequently examine the cultural dimensions of their own collaborative efforts.

In addition, this intercultural work, coming as it does from a distinctly different discipline, forces interculturalists to think through the disciplines that we have brought together to form what we see today as the intercultural profession and to prepare ourselves for it. It invites those of us who have taken this journey for many years to reflect on what have we brought with us and what have we left behind.

Among the important themes of *The Bridge* are immigrant experiences, the psychological and cultural crisis points abundant in the acculturation process. The editor opens the book with a chapter focused on “making a difference,” bridging through sharing, which she powerfully describes as, “being in mutual contact and bridging differences while acknowledging the unbridgeable.” Later, she insists, “Fundamental to this process is the conviction that even though change is inevitable as a result of a dialogic meeting, one can still maintain what is fundamental to oneself. The starting point is that of meeting and allowing, as opposed to demanding and imposing change.”

What does Gestalt bring to working with culture? The editor is clear: Gestalt views and observes differences, takes an interest in the way each culture configures the field, and strives to create enough common ground for bridges to be stretched across them. Far from being a purely theoretical concern, she offers her own cultural identity struggle and that of her clients as concrete examples of the uncertainties, pains and joys of steering ones identity through cultural storms.

Contributors to the volume are Gestalt therapists all, and, although the experiences of Jewishness and Israel are dominant for quite a few contributors, there is good diversity in the mix. The reader is introduced to a wide range of contexts in which Gestalt theory and practice are applied to therapy and social life.

Following the introduction are two important essays by Philip Lichtenberg and Gordon Wheeler that position culture within the Gestalt process. They give the reader both a theoretical and historical context for understanding Gestalt psychology and its terminology, making subsequent chapters more transparent for those unfamiliar with its principles and practices.

The Gestalt approach, in a sense, is counterfoil to those academic and scientific approaches to culture that seek to be as *value free* and detached as possible. Gestalt proposes work that is unashamedly *value rich* whether the values are traditional, religious, political or social. Moreover in relational contexts, even between therapist and client, cultural phenomena may become not only become ominous and threatening to others, but may also attack one’s own cultural immune system unless surfaced and dealt with. This is true for the individual but as well for society and politics. Imposed assimilation deprives the assimilator as well as the assimilated. Imperialism, cultural or otherwise, ultimately denudes the emperor. Bloated patriotism destroys the community it was meant to sustain.

Section Two of *The Bridge* shows applications of Gestalt to bridging of social phenomena. The struggle for identity and belonging is a part of experiences as disparate as surviving the Holocaust, being a victim of HIV or finding motivation for one’s studies. It may be about

dealing with immigration and social change or with the generational differences between mothers and daughters in a new land or a new age. Often in these situations individualism puts people at cultural risk and the return to wholeness lies in reconnection with others. One discussion in Section Two addresses belonging in an educational counseling context—a Gestalt approach assists minority students seeking to establish a self-image coherent with full participation in educational opportunities. The final essay tells of creating belonging in the formation of an Israeli-Arab theatre group through personal narration and dialogue.

Section Three of the book shifts the focus to interpersonal bridge making. Being born a Cleveland Indians baseball fan myself, it jogged my emotional memory to read how the gift of baseball cap bearing the very red face of Chief Wahoo stimulated a painful but productive dialogue toward understanding racism. Here the play of figure and ground in Gestalt help us to understand how cultural difference in the ground may make all the difference to the meaning of the symbols we exchange and actions our well intended actions toward each other. Factors that have formed us, though not unrelated to the color of our skin, can run much deeper and make up a far greater part of our self-construct than we are likely to imagine

A further essay, “It’s Greek to me,” deals with working across languages in a therapy group. I faced this when invited to do a Gestalt formation for a group of German psychology students in the late 1970’s. Before departing, I was assured, “We all speak and can work in English.” Within minutes I was thrown back on my high school German. This handicap was also an opportunity as I discovered the power of focusing on the non-verbal exploration of experience (“surfacing figures,” in Gestalt terms). I was frightened of the dependence and the risks of having the more fluent group members interpret when I was stuck, at the same time that they themselves were strongly engaged in what was emerging from the work. This essay reminded me as an intercultural professional to pay closer attention to the dynamics and feelings, ours and others’, that are part of our interpretations of situations we are involved in.

The final essays address bridging in therapy. While the title suggests we might hear about how to professionally connect people and their values, *The Bridges* talked about here are mainly between the therapist(s) and the client or client group. Again, engagement rather than detachment is a hallmark of the Gestalt process. It becomes very clear that the therapist’s own dialogue with difference is as critical to the outcome of therapy as the dialogues that bring the client or the group to experience itself and transcend its boundaries in healing and creation. Accounts relate how elements of racial and religious background are brought into the foreground of the therapists’ own crisis and dialogue. This stimulates change and growth that in turn nourishes the therapeutic sessions. There is no *deus ex machina* in Gestalt work. We bring who we are and what we have. It is this honest engagement with the other that often works miracles. Detachment only exists in the sense of knowing what feelings belong to whom.

The editor’s epilogue sums up the collaborative discussion of the cultural used to create this book with the dictum, “experience trumps theory.” This highlights the dilemma that the reader, especially if not a therapist but otherwise engaged in intercultural work must address and resolve in everyday practice. Experience is messy, and frequently interculturalists whose work may have healing potential but who don’t see themselves as therapists would themselves avoid the messiness. Much of the time, we are brought to work in situations because our clients fear the messiness and expect us to clean it up or at least help them clean it up. This book reminds us that both in therapy as well as training and consulting, intercultural messiness, the proverbial “can of worms”, holds the potential of its own reorganization if we

are able to honor it and bring it to the foreground and speak of it as we experience it. We are not all therapists but we are all engaged in the dance of figure and ground.

The Bridge is neither a manual of techniques nor a collection of cultural information. Rather it is a book that challenges therapists and interculturalists alike by inviting us, in Gestalt terms, to dialog with the dialog it presents us with, in short to do our own work in order to work well with others.