The Gestalt of Multiculturalism: An Analysis of Gestalt Therapy Theory in Light of Ethnic Diversity with a Focus on Organismic Self-Regulation

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The Gestalt of Multiculturalism: An Analysis of Gestalt Therapy Theory in Light of Ethnic Diversity with a Focus on Organismic Self-Regulation

Abstract
In the assessment of the utility of theoretical orientations for cultural appropriateness and sensitivity, examination of the foundational theory of these orientations is often overlooked in place of an emphasis on the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions and techniques. However, as interventions are ideally borne out of strong theoretical foundations, the importance of examining the implicit values of theoretical orientations is important. Gestalt therapy was examined as an example of a theoretical approach. Gestalt therapy is described by many of its practitioners as being highly sensitive and adaptable to culturally diverse clients due to the openness and inclusiveness found in the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological expression of the orientation. The implicit values embedded within the grounding principle of organismic self-regulation were reviewed to determine if the principle exemplifies a universal process of functioning or merely a culture-bound heuristic. Exploration of the ways Gestalt therapy's philosophical foundations, theoretical attitude, and methodological style impact the implementation of organismic self-regulation in work with culturally diverse clients was also conducted. Organismic self-regulation was found to have two interconnected levels, one of which can be easily adapted to diverse clients due to the flexibility to different cultural norms and traditions that the level provides, allowing for Gestalt therapists to be able to work with theoretical consistency with culturally different clients.

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THE GESTALT OF MULTICULTURALISM:
AN ANALYSIS OF GESTALT THERAPY THEORY IN LIGHT OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY WITH A FOCUS ON ORGANISMIC SELF-REGULATION

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF
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MARK I. RECK

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In the assessment of the utility of theoretical orientations for cultural appropriateness and sensitivity, examination of the foundational theory of these orientations is often overlooked in place of an emphasis on the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions and techniques. However, as interventions are ideally borne out of strong theoretical foundations, the importance of examining the implicit values of theoretical orientations is important. Gestalt therapy was examined as an example of a theoretical approach. Gestalt therapy is described by many of its practitioners as being highly sensitive and adaptable to culturally diverse clients due to the openness and inclusiveness found in the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological expression of the orientation. The implicit values embedded within the grounding principle of organismic self-regulation were reviewed to determine if the principle exemplifies a universal process of functioning or merely a culture-bound heuristic. Exploration of the ways Gestalt therapy’s philosophical foundations, theoretical attitude, and methodological style impact the implementation of organismic self-regulation in work with culturally diverse clients was also conducted. Organismic self-regulation was found to have two interconnected levels, one of which can be easily adapted to diverse clients due to the flexibility to different cultural norms and traditions that the level provides, allowing for Gestalt therapists to be able to work with theoretical consistency with culturally different clients.
Keywords: collectivism, Gestalt therapy, individualism, multiculturalism, organismic self-regulation, relatedness, selfhood
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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, many psychologists have emphasized that it is critical for the mental health field to actively aspire to become culturally sensitive to the values and needs of ethnic minority clients. This call for multicultural competency began with the acknowledgement of disparities in treatment access and outcomes between Caucasian and racial/ethnic minority clients (Sue et al., 1982). For those ethnic minority clients who did access mental health services, literature and research reviewers noted higher rates of premature termination, poorer treatment outcomes, and the pathologizing of cultural differences (Sue & Sue, 2008). Authors not only scrutinized cross-cultural research results, but went on to analyze and critique implicit biases within the field of psychology, both underlying research (e.g., Guthrie, 1997) and counseling and therapy (e.g., Sue, 2004). The influence and impact of the cultural biases within the field of psychology had been largely unexamined and looked to be all the more important given the projected increases in population growth of a variety of racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States (Trimble, 2003).

One of the first significant contributions to psychology to address cross-cultural issues was the creation of the multicultural counseling competencies (MCC; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). The MCC provided a multidimensional framework to conceptualize the process of multicultural competence within research and practice. The widespread acceptance of the MCC and its later refinement and operationalization
(Arredondo et al., 1996) helped it to become the foundation for the guidelines for both psychologists’ work with culturally different clients and training around multicultural competence put forth by the American Psychological Association (1993, 2003).

The authors of the MCC broke down competence into three dimensions of focus: attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Sue et al., 1992). Attitudes referred to therapists’ self-awareness of their personal values, assumptions, and biases that impact how they may view both themselves and others, especially those who are culturally different. Knowledge referred to information and facts about the norms, customs, practices, history, and other elements of culturally different clients. Skills referred to the collection of intervention techniques and strategies that are culturally appropriate and clinically effective for diverse client populations. All three dimensions are vital in striving toward multicultural competence, with each dimension supporting and impacting the other dimensions (Arredondo et al., 1996).

Although all three dimensions are equally important to address, training that increases and implements knowledge and skills in treatment is observed to be less anxiety-provoking and provide more of an opportunity to be learned without direct interaction with culturally-different individuals (Parham & Whitten, 2003). However, a number of multicultural authors note that education, even about knowledge and skills, that incorporates interaction with diverse communities or groups is much more beneficial in understanding the practical context of diversity and the appropriate and sensitive use of multicultural knowledge and skills (Arredondo et al., 1996). One potential obstacle for pursuing more experientially-based learning opportunities is the avoidance or restricted examination of the third MCC dimension: personal attitudes, values, and biases.
Many different factors impact the formation of personal attitudes, including developmental experiences, interpersonal interactions, family upbringing, cultural values, and education. One particular factor that plays a significant role in therapists’ attitudes toward clients is their theoretical orientation. Theoretical orientations can be understood as systems that outline two basic elements of psychotherapy: conceptualization of mental health (e.g., distinguishing between healthy versus unhealthy behavior, elaborating upon an etiology of unhealthy behavior) and mechanisms of therapeutic change (e.g., theory-supported models illustrating movement toward mental health, specific interventions or techniques that facilitate healthy change).

Although therapists, some of whom are likely influenced by third-parties to treatment such as managed care companies, focus on practical techniques and tend to be less interested in the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of interventions, theoretical orientations are very important in both treatment effectiveness and furthering scientific knowledge. Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson (1999) outline three major reasons why relying solely on highly formalized and defined techniques and interventions inhibits advances in clinical science. First, techniques lack the broad applicability to extend knowledge when being used to address novel problems or situations. If no underlying theory is apparent, it can be difficult to relate two distinct problems or situations with a specific formally defined technique. Second, techniques lack the systematic means for scientists to develop new techniques. True innovation is typically the result of theoretical shifts of perspective and not so much mere alteration of existing technology. Finally, disciplines that consist of high-precision techniques with limited applicability become increasingly disorganized and incoherent internally. If a scientific discipline relies merely
upon techniques, which may be highly effective in limited situations, the natural consequence is a system that is shallow in depth and overwhelmed with many disparate interventions, making the discipline impossible to master and impossible to effectively teach. Theory and philosophy nourish techniques and help to organize seemingly distinct problems or situations into a cohesive worldview.

Theoretical orientations, like any other worldview, contain various biases and values, some of which are inherited from philosophical roots, while others emerge from the coming together of the many components to the orientation. In an analogous way to Sue’s (2004) conceptualization of the “invisibility of Whiteness” as an obstacle for even well-intentioned therapists working sensitively with racial and ethnic minority populations, the uncritical examination of implicit values within theoretical orientations and their guiding principles, concepts, and philosophical foundations can be a barrier for therapists when faced with and trying to make sense of their culturally different clients. To date, the majority of the literature on multicultural therapy has focused at the level of intervention modification and therapeutic technique refinement, presuming the underlying theoretical bases of those interventions are consistent across cultures (e.g., Carlson & Carlson, 2000; Hays, 1995; Hwang, 2006). Much less has been reviewed and written about the extent to which foundational theoretical concepts within orientations either resonate or conflict with the values and beliefs of culturally different clients and, in the case of conflict, how therapists can resolve such differences and maintain adherence to their orientation.

The process of reviewing and analyzing every known theoretical orientation – and the variety of branches, schools, and emphases within each orientation – would be an
immensely overwhelming task. Although some psychologists are beginning to produce work examining theoretical orientations in light of multicultural issues (e.g., Frew & Spiegler, 2008), this domain still remains nascent and largely unexplored. However, a more in-depth examination of the theoretical bases of therapeutic orientations may both benefit clinicians’ understanding of their own theoretical orientations and improve therapists’ understanding of their culturally different clients.

For the purposes of this dissertation, one theoretical orientation, Gestalt therapy, will be emphasized and explored, particularly focusing on one of its grounding principles: organismic self-regulation. The selection of Gestalt therapy for this analysis primarily stems from how it is understood by its adherents regarding its expansiveness and inclusiveness. For instance, Laura Perls, one of the founders of the orientation, had described Gestalt therapy as an “experiential, phenomenological, holistic, organismic, existential psychotherapy” (quoted in Bloom, 2001). Gestalt therapists have also acknowledged significant influences from Eastern religious thought, in addition to general Western philosophical traditions (Crocker, 2005; Zahm & Gold, 2002). Further, many Gestalt therapists have increasingly contributed literature examining the intersection of their orientation with issues of multiculturalism and cross-cultural adaptation (e.g., Bar-Yoseph, 2005; Coven, 2004; Fernbacher, 2005; Frew 2008; Gaffney, 2006; Wheeler, 2005).

Similarly, exploring every component and element of non-European-American (i.e., non-Western) ethnic groups (e.g., language, rituals, history) is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead, in this dissertation I will focus on a cultural domain directly pertinent to psychology, namely the self. As notions of self, especially in many non-
Western cultures, are inextricably interwoven into values about and roles within a larger social group, this examination and discussion of self will also include analyses and comparisons of differing perspectives of relatedness, often conceptualized as either emphasizing independence and self-reliance, as stereotypically characteristic of European-American cultures (individualism), or emphasizing interdependence and deference to the group, as stereotypically characteristic of a variety of non-European-American ethnic groups (collectivism).

This dissertation will begin with a discussion of the individualism-collectivism construct, including a brief history of how this construct came to be one of the most widely used ways to distinguish cultures in Western scholarship. These classifications will be defined and developments and critiques of individualism-collectivism will be reviewed. The operationalization of individualism-collectivism for the purposes of the dissertation will follow, leading to a review of cultural differences of self and relatedness based on these classifications within social psychological research and the ramifications of such differences for clinical psychological practice.

The next section of the dissertation will include a review and critical analysis of the literature of Gestalt therapy theory, with an emphasis on the foundational heuristic of organismic self-regulation, as it is applied to multicultural therapy. Specific focus will be placed on comparing and analyzing conceptualizations and experiences of self and the collectivist mode of operation found in many different cultures with Gestalt therapists’ understanding based on their Western-influenced theoretical stance. This will include examining and critiquing Gestalt therapy theory along the implicit individualistic bias found in its basic principles and foundational philosophy. Threads of traditionally non-
Western views of self found within Gestalt therapy will be addressed, as well as how such views of self may aid in reorienting Gestalt therapy to a more multicultural perspective, both in theory and in practice.

The dissertation will conclude with a discussion of ways in which Gestalt therapists may maintain theoretical adherence and be effective clinicians in treating culturally different clients. Specifically, clinical phenomenology, field theory, and dialogic existentialism will be elaborated upon, all in the service of the experiential attitude and experimental therapeutic style that underlies the Gestalt approach, in how therapists may allow for meaningful communication of conflicting values between the more Western-oriented Gestalt therapists and their ethnically different clients. Methodological examination of various aspects or levels of organismic self-regulation will be presented, with elaboration on how organismic self-regulation can be used in work with culturally diverse clients. Suggestions for future avenues of study will also be presented.
LITERATURE REVIEW ON ETHNICALLY DIVERSE VIEWS OF SELF AND RELATEDNESS

To comprehensively discuss ethnically and culturally diverse views regarding selfhood and relatedness, a general examination of the various issues within these larger domains is necessary. A discussion of specific categorical terms in the cross-cultural literature will be followed by a more focused examination of general trends among specific cultural groups. This section will rely upon a review of the multicultural literature between 1980 and 2008 through the PsycINFO/Ovid database based on the following keywords: *collectivism, cross cultural differences, cross cultural treatment, culture (anthropological), diversity, ethnic identity, individualism, multiculturalism, self concept*. The decision to begin the literature search in 1980 was made in large part due to the significance of the work of Hofstede (1980) in describing and implementing the concept of individualism and the impact his study had on the larger field of social science, as described in more detail below.

Individualism-Collectivism

An examination of the different views of self and relatedness among diverse cultures has been a daunting task for many social scientists. Such an examination has focused on finding accurate and appropriate classification labels that balance the similarities of different cultures that allow for reasonable generalizations and cross-
cultural analyses with each culture’s unique themes and traits in order to avoid overgeneralization and reliance on stereotyping. Although many labels have been used in the social scientific literature, the constructs of individualism and collectivism are two of the most known and generally accepted labels. However, despite their wide use and acceptance, there has been confusion and criticism about their validity and overall explanatory power in research.

This section will begin with an exploration of the individualism-collectivism constructs, as they will be the main classifications used to describe general differences of self and relatedness between diverse ethnic groups in this project. In order to avoid overgeneralization of ethnic groups under these labels, yet find terms that appropriately generalize in a meaningful way, a brief review of the history and use of the individualism-collectivism constructs will be presented, including the impact of these constructs and related research on clinical psychology. Then, these constructs will be operationalized for the purposes of this project, culminating in a review of perspectives of self and relatedness between different cultures.

Psychological Research

Within the Western social sciences, one of the widely used ways to contrast ethnic groups and cultural values has been to classify them as either being individualist or collectivist in focus (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990; Voronov & Singer, 2002). The spirit of these terms had been in use in early scholarship on societal differences, such as with the work of Durkheim (1887/1997) in describing distinct relationship styles between complex societies that created temporary
relationships among dissimilar people (organic solidarity, akin to individualism) and traditional societies that created permanent relationships among similar people (mechanical solidarity, akin to collectivism). Hofstede’s (1980) work on assessing culture, which included an individualism-collectivism dimension, gave significant support to the continued use and formalized study of individualism-collectivism to contrast cultures.

The bulk of the research done around individualism-collectivism compared general attitudes and values of culturally different groups and contrasted the political, social, and economic factors associated with each group (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Kashima, Kokubo, Kashima, Boxall, Yamaguchi, & Macrae, 2004; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). As a result, individualism became associated with concepts and values such as self-reliance, an independent self-concept, egalitarian relationships, and temporary and voluntary small-group membership. Also, individualism was correlated with sociopolitical and economic factors such as affluence and resource availability. Specific nations, such as the United States and Great Britain, were identified as being generally individualist in focus (Triandis et al., 1990). This aggregation of data made it easy for social scientists to equate individualism with industrialized Western nations (Fiske, 2002; Oyserman et al., 2002).

Conversely, much of the same research used in exploring individualism gave rise to conceptualizing collectivism as an opposite construct (e.g., Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Collectivism became associated with concepts and values like deference to an identified group, a self-concept based on group membership or social roles, hierarchical relationships, and permanent and
involuntary large-group membership. Some of the sociopolitical and economic factors that became associated with collectivism included homogeneity of the populace (i.e., lack of substantial numbers of immigrants) and less access to natural and technological resources (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis et al., 1988). Many African, Latin American, and Asian nations that were the focus of research were identified as collectivist (Triandis et al., 1990). From all of this data, social scientists had no difficulty in generalizing collectivism with developing nations, tribal societies, and non-European-American countries.

As more cross-cultural research was done, the individualism-collectivism constructs were further refined. One of the first refinements was offered by Triandis (Triandis, Leung, Villareal, & Clack, 1985; Triandis et al., 1988), which acknowledged two levels of analysis regarding individualist and collectivist traits. The individualism-collectivism constructs became a cultural level of analysis of values, while new constructs – allocentrism-idiocentrism – were established to address values and orientations at the psychological level. Allocentrism focused on the individual as part of a group (including acceptance of group norms as one’s own), and was positively correlated with social support and low levels of alienation. Idiocentrism emphasized the individual as an independent person (including self determination of how to think and feel), and was positively correlated with a focus on personal achievement and perceived loneliness (Triandis et al., 1985).

This clarification served as explanation for the differing results found between ecological factor analyses (where the number of observations is based on the number of cultures studied) and within-culture analyses (where the number of observations is based
on the number of people responding). This two-dimensional classification also challenged the assumption that all the people within a culture must have personality traits and value orientations that exactly match the culture’s overarching values and beliefs. In other words, this new classification system provided a means to represent and account for allocentric people in individualist cultures and idiocentric people in collectivist cultures (Matsumoto, Weissman, Preston, Brown, & Kupperbusch, 1997; Triandis et al., 1988).

Another refinement of individualism-collectivism involved the separation of the horizontal-vertical dimension that had been imbedded with the constructs (Triandis, 2001; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Egalitarian (or horizontal) relationships had been presumed to be observed solely in individualist cultures, while hierarchical (or vertical) relationships were thought to be characteristic of collectivist cultures. The establishment of the horizontal-vertical dimension of culture as distinct from the individualism-collectivism constructs helped to take into account the presence of cultures that were generally individualist in orientation and traits but maintained a hierarchical system of relationships, as well as cultures that in all appearances looked to be collectivist yet relied upon egalitarian relationships.

The three-dimensional model of individualism-collectivism, allocentrism-idiocentrism, and horizontal-vertical further clarified the relationship between individuals and groups, especially in the way Deutsch (1949) had conceived of the interaction and correlation between individual goals and group goals: either positively correlated (cooperation), negatively correlated (competition), or uncorrelated (individualism). This model implicitly incorporated and operationalized the concept of social tightness (Pelto, 1968), a construct that had been used in research describing and comparing self-group
differences of cultures. Furthermore, the three-dimensional model provided a framework for other social scientific constructs to be examined, such as high- and low-context communication styles (Hall & Hall, 1990).

Despite the work done to refine the accuracy and utility of the individualism-collectivism constructs and its continuing popularity in research, some social scientists remained critical of the classifications, citing problems with either the theoretical basis of the labels (e.g., Fiske, 2002; Voronov & Singer, 2002) or the cases of restricted usefulness in cross-cultural research (e.g., Kapoor, Hughes, Baldwin, & Blue, 2003; Parkes, Schneider, & Bochner, 1999). Even proponents of the constructs, such as Triandis, warned against the overuse of individualism-collectivism and the need for the continual sharpening of the constructs, as well as criticizing the conceptualization of individualism-collectivism as a bipolar spectrum rather than as orthogonal constructs (Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis et al., 1986). One attempt to determine the overall empirical soundness of individualism-collectivism was to review the individualism-collectivism research to test assumed facts about cultural orientations and values.

Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002) conducted substantial meta-analyses of the individualism-collectivism scholarship done between 1980 and 1999, which included 170 studies. Using the results of the meta-analyses, Oyserman et al. wanted to determine if empirical support was available for a number of individualism-collectivism assumptions. First, they wanted to determine if Americans, as theoretically representative of Western culture, were more individualistic and less collectivistic than other groups. Second, they tested if European Americans were more individualistic and less collectivistic than other racial groups in the United States. Finally, the researchers wanted
to determine if plausible psychological implications of individualism-collectivism (i.e., self-concept and self-esteem, well-being and emotion, attribution style, and relationality) matched the constructs normally associated with those implications (e.g., people from individualist cultures would rely more on an independent self-concept over a group-based identity, people from collectivist cultures would emphasize familial obligations more than individually-oriented tasks and achievement).

Overall, Oyserman et al. (2002) found that European Americans were both more individualistic and less collectivistic than most other groups. However, the researchers discovered “truly startling findings” in comparing European Americans with Japanese and Koreans, namely that Americans were not statistically significantly less collectivistic than Japanese or Koreans (p. 18). Furthermore, European Americans were not found to be more individualistic than either Latino Americans or African Americans; in fact, African Americans were found to more individualistic than European Americans.

Also, the researchers found moderate effects for the presumed relationship between individualism-collectivism and the psychological implications of self-concept and relationality. For self-concept, this included correlations between individualism and higher use of personal self-descriptors, the belief that self-esteem has to do more with personal success rather than family life, and a higher degree of optimism. Correlations were found between collectivism and higher use of socially-oriented self-descriptors, need for affiliation, sensitivity to rejection, and the belief that family life is more important for self-esteem rather than personal achievement. Pertaining to relationality, correlations were noted between individualism and communication that was goal-oriented and direct, preference for resolving conflict by confrontation and arbitration, and
cooperation with others only when a team focus was suggested by instructions. Alternatively, correlations were noted between collectivism and communication that was indirect or of high-context, preference for resolving conflict by accommodation and negotiation, and cooperation in social dilemma tasks.

The researchers found “remarkably consistent” large effects on the impact of individualism-collectivism on attribution style (Oyserman et al., 2002, p. 35). They found that individualism was a reliable predictor of abstract (decontextualized) reasoning, highly correlated with a personal (dispositional) attribution style, and associated with a personal basis when considering one’s attitude toward an event. Conversely, the researchers found that collectivism was a reliable predictor of contextualized reasoning, highly correlated with a situational attribution style, and associated with the expectations of others when considering one’s attitude toward an event.

However, the research by Oyserman et al. (2002) also revealed some important, general issues about individualism-collectivism. For instance, Fiske (2002) pointed out that the individualism-collectivism research appeared to equate (or reduce) cultural heritage with national citizenship, which is not how culture is typically conceived (cf. Betancourt & Lopez, 1993). Further, the aggregated data used in the meta-analyses revealed that national citizenship is relied upon because larger cultural units (such as geographic region) are too heterogeneous to be useful to encapsulate a culture. As an example, Fiske emphasized the problems with looking at Asian (or, slightly more precisely, East Asian) culture when research has found significant differences in the levels of individualism-collectivism among Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans when compared with European Americans. He argued that the lack of intra-regional research
and the presence of potential within-group differences based on other factors, such as metropolitan versus regional habitation (e.g., Kashima et al., 2004) characterize the imprecision of the individualism-collectivism constructs.

*Psychological Practice*

Influenced by the early work of social scientists, clinical and counseling psychologists also began to incorporate the labels of individualism-collectivism in the literature of multiculturalism. In some of the earliest literature from the multicultural movement, American psychologists had often focused on the discrepancy between the values and characteristics of counseling and therapy, which was essentially the same as the values and characteristics of White Americans, and those of other racial and ethnic groups. The common theme in the literature was that European Americans, and Western psychology by extension, tended to be oriented towards internalized agency and individual responsibility, nuclear family relations, and multiple, temporary group memberships (characteristics commonly associated with individualism). Conversely, many other ethnic groups tended to be oriented towards externalized agency and shared responsibility, family relations that included extended family members or fictive relationships, and limited, permanent group memberships (characteristics commonly associated with collectivism). Such differences in values, characteristics, and focus provided serious concerns about the effectiveness and appropriateness for elements of counseling and therapy to various ethnic groups within the United States (Dana, 1998; Helms & Cook, 1999; Kirmayer, 2007; Lee, 2006; Sue & Sue, 2008).
At the same time, psychologists have challenged an either-or perspective of individualism-collectivism within various cultural groups through observation and active work with diverse clients. For example, Helms and Cook (1999) have stated that although it is commonly accepted that White American culture is individualistic, White Americans will exhibit increasingly collectivistic behaviors and perspectives with each other through ongoing exposure to one another and from the perceived threat from other cultural groups. Similarly, various collectivistic cultural groups may express their respective collectivism quite differently from each other, such as what constitutes the primary reference group (or in-group) for a collectivistic group. Generally, the extended family has been identified as the in-group for many Asian American and Latino American groups, whereas African Americans tend to develop a primary reference group involving fictive kinship or even their larger racial/ethnic group.

Another element that psychologists have found significantly challenges the rigid either-or perspective of individualism-collectivism is the role of acculturation in shaping cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (e.g., Dana, 1998; Hays, 2001; Helms & Cook, 1999; Lee, 2006; Pope-Davis, Coleman, Liu, & Toporek, 2003; Sue & Sue, 2008). As the population of the United States is made up of one of the most widely diverse collections of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups (Trimble, 2003), the likelihood for a conflict between the dominant White American culture and one’s identified cultural heritage, especially the more geographically distant or philosophically different one’s heritage is from the larger European worldview. Furthermore, even among various European ethnic groups and nationalities, distinct cultural differences exist and may cause tension with White American culture, despite the fact that the dominant culture has roots in a general
European worldview. The combination of cultural identity development and level of acculturation often further complicate the capacity to easily classify individuals or even larger cultural groups as being either predominantly individualist or collectivist.

With this awareness, psychologists still often rely upon the classifications of individualism-collectivism in their descriptions, discussions, and analyses of cultural diversity. It is implicitly understood in the multicultural literature that these terms are not as rigid and definite as they may seem, with an unspoken consideration (or sometimes an explicit disclaimer) of the aforementioned factors that challenge the classifications as mutually exclusive. In the case of literature devoted to philosophical or abstract theoretical discussions, the establishment of operationalized definitions for those classifications is not typically required, as would be the case in empirical reports or research literature. However, this also provides psychologists with the challenge of having a shared language and understanding the implicit elements that underlie and impact these classifications. With the amount of work put forth by authors and psychologists in defining and redefining terms, it is easily presumed that such a shared understanding is not a reality (e.g., Hays, 2001; Helms & Cook, 1999; Helms & Richardson, 1997; Pinderhughes, 1989; Sue & Sue, 2008).

**Working Usage of Individualism-Collectivism**

For the purposes of this study, the use of the classifications of individualism-collectivism will be retained for convenience. However, acknowledging the aforementioned difficulties and problems in using those terms from both the research and practical domains, an explicit frame of use will be presented to reduce confusion and
vagaries about their use in this paper. As this dissertation is primarily one of theoretical analysis and discussion, the presented frame is likely to be inadequate as an empirical, operationalized definition. The purpose of framing the use of the classifications is not specifically for later use in empirical studies – although such a frame could certainly guide future formulations of operationalized definitions – but rather as a way to bring clarity to the subsequent comparisons and contrasts between various cultural groups’ perspectives on selfhood and relatedness.

The first important consideration regarding the use of individualism and collectivism in this project is that these classifications do not represent mutually exclusive or opposing worldviews, but merely different perspectives and priorities of values that may be expressed in a variety of ways depending on the culture examined or the context viewed. For example, if a group is identified as individualist, this does not necessarily mean that members of the group (or the group as a whole) never evince any behaviors and characteristics commonly associated with collectivism. Further, it would be quite possible that two individualist groups may appear to differ in significant ways regarding priorities of values or expression of individualism despite both tending toward many of the common characteristics of individualist groups.

Secondly, the use of individualism-collectivism refers to groups as larger wholes. Individuals within those groups may actively accept and engage in behaviors and activities associated with the cultural group’s overall way of being or they may have differing views from the larger group. This phenomenon and its overall social dynamics were elaborated in the empirical work regarding the individual psychological levels of individualism and collectivism, namely idiocentrism and allocentrism (Trandis et al.,
Though cultural groups are the focus of this study, thus the use of individualism and collectivism to describe them generally, it is acknowledged that specific individuals within those cultural groups may or may not fully adhere to the larger group norms homogeneously. For instance, within a collectivistic group, any particular individual may have personal values and priorities that tend to also emphasize group belongingness and social roles (allocentrism) or may bristle at socially-defined obligations privately despite maintaining overt social behaviors that are expected from them (idiocentrism).

Further, as mentioned previously, factors stemming from acculturation impact values, norms, and behaviors of individuals and families immensely. Because the focus of this dissertation is ethnic and cultural groups in the United States, the role of acculturation is an important factor to consider. This study will not explicitly explore the role of acculturation in affecting the experiences and lives of various ethnic groups in the United States and the variations of worldviews, priorities of values, and alterations in traditions and customs that acculturation influences. Instead, the particular forms of individualism and collectivism of ethnic and cultural groups will be presented as they have tended to form and develop outside of direct acculturative influence of the dominant American culture.

The components of the frame of use of individualism-collectivism reveal an important point about this classification, and possibly about cultural studies in general, namely the caution of generalization. In viewing cultural groups, descriptions and illustrations will seem to rely upon generalizations of those groups. Such generalizations could be criticized for overemphasizing specific cultural elements, possibly to the point of reducing cultural groups to stereotypes or caricatures. It is important to always
consider that the generalizations do emphasize particular elements or common themes in cultural groups, but must be used and approached with caution, particularly when notable differences or variations are also present. Although the presentation of individualist and collectivist cultures will rely upon some degree of generalization, effort will be made to temper such presentations with caution and discussion of differences and variations within those respective classifications. It is also equally important for the reader to revisit and keep in mind the dangers of generalizations, using them only as heuristics to a larger understanding for multicultural studies.

With the frame established, a brief discussion of what individualism and collectivism are and how those terms will be understood in this study is necessary. Definitions for these classifications will emphasize general tendencies and thematic structures rather than specific, static elements as a way of buffering the danger of generalization. It is also worth noting again that these definitions and usages do not take into account the dynamics of acculturation with dominant American culture.

An individualist culture tends to consider the individual person as the foundation for understanding human-environment interactions. Such cultures commonly emphasize personal achievement and success, individual privacy, an attribution style that focuses on the individual and his/her behaviors in a situation, and a self-definition that focuses upon how one is distinct and unique from others. Self-reliance in individualist cultures tends to be understood as independence: Each person has the freedom to engage in their own activities or accomplish their own goals with an expectation of limited or no assistance from others. Such cultures are typically task-oriented, having a strong focus on completing objectives or goals of a project or activity. Group memberships in
individualist cultures are often relegated to small in-groups that are voluntarily joined by the individual. Demands made by in-groups are usually segmented, requiring contributions only at a certain time and place or of a certain kind. Should in-group demands become too costly or burdensome for a member, the individual will often leave the group and either form or join a new in-group whose demands and values match the individual.

A collectivist culture tends to consider established social groups (e.g., families, communities) as the foundation for understanding human-environment interactions. Such cultures commonly emphasize the achievement and success of these groups, frequent and consistent involvement in each individual’s life, an attribution style that focuses on the structures and circumstances of a situation, and a self-definition that focuses upon one’s role and obligations to the larger group. Self-reliance in collectivist cultures tends to be understood as being able to meet one’s obligations and fulfill one’s roles without being a burden on the rest of the group. Such cultures are typically people-oriented, having a strong focus on forming relationships and creating community as a natural initial step in attending to projects or activities. Group memberships in collectivist cultures are often relegated to a limited number of larger in-groups that individuals often do not voluntarily join, but may have been “born into” (e.g., family). Demands made by in-groups are usually diffuse, requiring individual members to contribute throughout their lives and possibly requiring a variety of roles to be taken up by the individual. Should in-group demands become too costly or burdensome for a member, the individual will often defer their own personal goals to the goals of the in-group. Departing in-groups in collectivist
cultures tends to be rare and those individuals who break ties with their in-groups are often viewed with shame or may experience a personal sense of shame.

Selfhood and Relatedness

Now that a working usage of individualism-collectivism has been established, an exploration of the themes of those classifications within the United States follows. First, a description and analysis of the more predominant individualist elements of American dominant culture will be noted with some discussion of the factors that influenced the form American culture takes presently around selfhood and relatedness. Then, a description of culturally diverse groups will follow, many of which have strong collectivist elements in their conceptions of selfhood and relatedness, and will be compared and contrasted with the American dominant culture.

Western (American) Individualist Values of Self and Others

The unique culture of the United States of America is often thought of as the prototypical example of Western and individualist culture (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Oyserman et al., 2002). Indeed, almost all of the aforementioned characteristics of individualist cultures match features commonly associated with American culture. Part of the American worldview was inherited through a myriad of European perspectives, elaborated upon by philosophers and intellectuals, from ancient Greek thinkers to more contemporary continental philosophers (Russell, 1945/1972). The unique interpretation and implementation of those European elements combined with the developmental
history of the United States resulted in a particular view of selfhood and relatedness within American culture.

As stated earlier, one of the most notable characteristics with American culture—and many individualist cultures in general—is how the individual person, distinct from all else, is taken as the basis of analysis. It is possible that one of the beginnings of such a focus on the individual person can be seen in the development of monotheistic cosmogonies, particularly from the Abrahamic religions. Where many early Western cosmogonies, which tended to be polytheistic, seemed to espouse the creation of humanity in large numbers through various forms of demiurgic activity, the emergence of monotheism seemed to posit a more gradual development of humanity, with an emphasis on the individual. One of the most well known examples of this is the creation story found in the Book of Genesis of the Hebrew Scriptures (also known as the Old Testament), where humanity begins with the divine creation of the first human, Adam (Gen. 1:26, New Revised Standard Version). In this more singular portrayal of humanity, there appeared to be more of a focus on individual agency, such as when Adam named the animals of the world (Gen. 2:19-20), as well as the overall emerging theme of the power of the individual, illustrated with the general proclamation of Adam’s superiority and domination over the natural world (Gen. 1:28). These characteristics may be an extension of similar qualities attributed on a grander level to God, who may be seen as the ultimate individual, often portrayed as distinct from the universe.

Individual agency and emphasis had not found full fruition in Western societies and governments until the 18th century. Up until this point, most Western societies had a narrow form of individualism, namely the investment of societal, political, and
sometimes religious power into select individuals in the form of theocracies, monarchies, and other feudal systems. Those individuals in power in these systems were the central executives in much of the sociopolitical and economic domains, while the general populace deferred their individual needs in order to serve the ruling classes. In return, the populace was given security and protection from those in power. However, as new economic thinking developed and commerce and production evolved, these feudal systems were judged to be inadequate or even detrimental to the populace, as the smaller ruling classes would regulate, adapt, or create laws that would benefit them at the expense of the larger populace. This environment allowed for the development of capitalist economics and modern democratic politics, both of which shared a common philosophy, that of liberalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Gaus & Courtland, 2007).

Liberalism in economics, as exemplified in capitalism, aspired to have people gain more direct control over commercial affairs, especially regarding their business and property ownership, rather than being forced to accept outside intervention or regulation from a feudal ruler or monarch. In the sociopolitical sphere, liberalism translated into allowing for all voices in society to be weighted equally regarding policies and legislation instead of the voices of the many (the general populace) being unheard and sociopolitical decisions being made by the few (the ruling class). The presumption in liberalism was that all humans were equal without any characteristics or qualities that innately made some more superior or inferior than others. Ironically, this universal equality also meant that each individual was responsible for him/herself, needing to actively use reason to assert him/herself in the world.
Indeed, for some thinkers and philosophers, the key to human nature was self-sufficiency through the use of reason and that societies and civilizations have forced people to accept artificial forms of morality and being that deny expression of their true human nature (e.g., Löwith, 1991; Rousseau, 1762/1993). The assertion was that it was up to the individual to discern his/her place in the world, apart from the forced elements from society, through the human faculty of reason. Where doubt and uncertainty could be attributed to knowledge gained through one’s senses or taken from others, individual reason (or, more accurately, the process of reasoning) could not be doubted and, thus, was exalted as the basis for how humans were to understand the world, glean knowledge, and discover truth (Descartes, 1637/1960).

Various European nations would take up the call of reason-inspired liberalism over the course of the late 18th and 19th centuries, but one of the earliest implementations of the liberal doctrine developed within the American colonies of the British. As a result of various political and economic issues, American colonists sought full independence from their British overseers, which led to the American Revolutionary War. Once the colonists achieved their independence from Britain, the liberalism that helped inspire the colonists’ desire for autonomy and economic freedom became one of the guiding principles upon which the new American government would be based.

An important aspect of the European roots of liberalism was that the humanism that its thinkers espoused focused on Europeans and that, at the very least, non-Europeans were implicitly considered to not be human (Mills, 1997). Bonilla-Silva (2003) also briefly pointed out examples of European philosophers, including influential liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill, who expressed viewpoints of how racial/ethnic groups were
not only different from each other in appearance and innate capacity, but that such a
difference led to hierarchical ranking of certain groups over others, whereby “superior”
groups were justified in colonizing and enslaving “inferior” groups. Such a
dehumanization of non-Europeans would be the primary way to rationally justify
colonialism and slavery of those groups in the face of a universal, egalitarian system of
thought, such as liberalism. This would also begin the process of a new form of
liberalism, which Bonilla-Silva referred to as “abstract liberalism.”

The key of abstract liberalism is transferring conceptual elements of political and
economic liberalism (e.g., equality, individualism, choice) into rational, decontextualized
ways that explain away racial/ethnic matters as significant factors in the disparities
between culturally diverse groups. Abstract liberalism is based in the general innate
egalitarian views of classical liberalism and extends such thought, ignoring the presence
of any societal, historical, or institutional differences that may actually exist for different
groups of people. Bonilla-Silva (2003) introduced abstract liberalism as one of four
frames that contributed to what he noted as “color-blind racism” in modern America, but
it can also be used to re-emphasize the American cultural value regarding a high priority
on rational thinking and empirical reasoning, especially in determining how the
individual self acts in the world.

Throughout much of Western philosophy and intellectual thought has been the
implicit presumption that individuals exist first and that culture is something that happens
to individuals as they develop. Indeed, this was the foundational assumption of the two
primary and often opposing lines of thought in European philosophy: empiricism and
rationalism. With empiricist philosophers, such as Locke, the individual was explicitly
regarded as a “blank slate” upon which the world would “write” experiences and ideas, this notion having been derived from Aristotle’s previous description of the individual mind as being like an “unscribed tablet” (Russell, 1945/1972). Thus, the general empiricist position was that individuals came into the world without any innate ideas. Rationalist philosophers, like Descartes, maintained that the individual came into the world with a common human faculty of rationality, which included various embedded a priori concepts (Descartes, 1637/1960; Russell, 1945/1972). Although proponents of both philosophical lineages asserted different ideas about what is intellectually given to humans upon birth – whether inherently nothing (empiricism) or inherent rationality (rationalism) – the further extension was that culture was something accepted by individuals after the fact, not something that inhered in humans from the beginning.

As Western philosophy developed, the lines of empiricism and rationalism were integrated with later thinkers such as Kant (Kant, 1781/1999; Seung 2007). In addition to philosophical developments, the rise of scientific and technological advancements also opened the opportunity for individuals to view and understand the natural world in a whole new way, with systematic methods of experimentation and refined measuring tools. Such research methods and tools were implemented to account for biases in personal observations, making the process of experimental observation more consistent and valid, so that scientific theories and hypotheses could be tested with appropriate rigor to delineate the laws of nature through accurate and intellectual interpretation of collected data. Thus, scientific empiricism merged the classical empiricist position of knowledge through observation with the rationalist position of knowledge as derived through complex cogitation. Again, the implicit emphasis was on reliance on humans’ “higher”
capacities of thinking, divorced from emotionality and faith, thought to have no place in the domain of scientific rationality (cf. Damasio, 1994). In much the same way that emotion can bias scientific findings, so does the influence of a particular culture. Thus, this initial form of scientific empiricism (positivism) was established and touted as a procedure that transcended culture, ensuring a “pure” method for accessing the natural world (Ayer, 1971; Dennett, 1998; Giddens, 1974).

This line of thinking further developed and cemented a perspective that individuals appeared to exist apart from others and that culture could be selected (or transcended) since it was something that was given to (or forced upon) the individual after birth. The individual was characterized as being somewhat reducible to a personal cognizing agent, whether immaterial (a position of many religiously-oriented Cartesians, referring to the soul) or physical (a position of many early scientifically-oriented Cartesians, referring to the brain). Although some late 19th and early 20th century social scientists, particularly anthropologists and ethnographers, challenged such Cartesian notions of selfhood, the positivist influence of the new empiricism made these critiques less convincing and open to being criticized.

The works of authors like Alger, which emphasized how people could succeed through self-reliance and individual force of will (Bonilla-Silva, 2003), and the individualist analyses of existential thinkers (Earnshaw, 2006) filtered into the Western (especially United States) worldview. The focus was on the independence of the individual, how he/she was solely responsible for his/her lot in life, and how people needed to develop the spirit characterized in America’s pioneer past, one of rugged self-reliance and “can-do” attitude. Although other people were acknowledged and living
among others was important, the primary emphasis was on oneself and how others could potentially hinder or even threaten one’s individuality.

The presentation of the theory of evolution by natural selection as proposed by Darwin (1859/1894) and the later developments in genetics (e.g., Dawkins, 1989; Jones, 1995) also contributed to ideas of selfhood. However, with the impact in the early genetic and evolutionary research, some authors and commentators merely replaced the reductive object from the soul or brain to the human genome (Bannister, 1987). Further, misinterpretation of genetic research and theory in the popular culture led to extrapolations that human nature, as dictated by genes, is founded upon a sense of selfishness and ever-striving uniqueness apart from the environment. With Western notions of individualism already prevalent in the society, such seemingly unbiased ideas lent quasi-empirical support that an individualist stance was the natural, universal way of being.

Diverse Collectivist Examples of Self and Others

In discussing the values related to selfhood and otherness found in cultures outside of the West whose emphasis can be described as primarily collectivist, two challenges are apparent: incoherence and reductionism. That is, the attempt to describe and explore all the primarily collectivist cultures and their beliefs, philosophies, and values about self and relatedness would lead to the generation of an immense literature that may be further complicated by how such groups are discretely defined and the level of analysis done. As a result, an incoherent picture may emerge of culture that may be overly relativist to a micro-cultural level (e.g., each individual family within a group),
which would not be useful in discussing general trends of culture. Conversely, generalization may be achieved by distilling cultures down to some particular aspect, quality, or label (beyond collectivism), such as relying upon a common linguistic family, geographical location, or even national affiliation. This would sacrifice potentially important differences between groups in the service of easier discussion of general trends.

Unfortunately, it would appear that there is no easy solution to this conundrum, but it can be moderated by an explicit discussion of the frame of how collectivist cultures will be looked at for the purposes of this study, as noted previously. In discussing different expressions of cultural collectivism, a focus will be placed upon four primary identifications of race/ethnicity derived from a significant portion of the multicultural literature (e.g., Sue & Sue, 2008) and research (e.g., Oyserman et al., 2002) pertaining the United States: Africans, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans. A brief discussion of each of these identifications follows with more specific examples of particular groups and subpopulations subsumed under each heading explored. Although these identifications are problematic in that they assume some level of within-group homogeneity, may exclude discussion of some specific cultures (e.g., North African, Near Eastern, and Arabic cultures are often considered “White” for the purposes of census demographic information; Grieco & Cassidy, 2001), and are seemingly established upon a geographic basis that has been challenged as a foundation for defining a culture (e.g., Fiske, 2002), they are retained in this dissertation due to their familiarity to an American audience.
Africans.

The discussion of Africans is meant to focus on individuals and cultural groups of Africa. Although some of the values and worldviews of such African groups are observed with African Americans (i.e., Black Americans born and raised in the United States), the emphasis here will be on the indigenous groups of Africa. Even with excluding North African groups from this examination (as noted previously, North African cultures are often subsumed under the White racial/cultural label), the remaining groups and tribes of the African continent include a diverse collection of different languages and customs. However, many of these groups share similar worldviews, thematic values, and understandings of selfhood.

As could be expected for a group labeled as collectivist, many African groups conceive of the individual only based on his/her relationship to the family and the community (Ma & Schoeneman, 1997). A group-based self-concept is common among the various peoples of Africa, such that a simple question of who one is will elicit a response based solely on clan identifications (Beattie, 1980). The foundation of many African tribes is the presence of stable and cohesive social units. Since many of the daily duties and tasks for adults involve upkeep and maintenance of the community or tribe as a whole, parents have little time to devote to their individual children. As a result, from a very early age, individuality (at least, as it is conceived of in Western cultures) is not recognized.

This group-based self-concept also builds upon an important value seen across tribes, namely of harmony. The value of relating to others in “correct” ways and all individuals are an organic part of a greater social unit is taught to children very early on.
Cooperation is a key part of this correct behavior. For instance, among Kenyans, since parents are often too busy to give large amounts of attention to their individual children, the community’s children learn to work together and help each other, thus, bolstering the importance of cooperative efforts and solidifying experientially how each of them contribute to the larger social group (Ma & Schoeneman, 1997).

Although self is understood in an organic way regarding membership in the group, this does not equate to being an undifferentiated aspect of the community. Many African groups have ways of establishing and monitoring one’s status within the group. The most common system employed across different groups and tribes is age-oriented ceremonies. Often these ceremonies mark changes in an individual’s phase of life, giving him/her new duties and responsibilities, and providing changes in group status. These ceremonies also cement the individual as a part of the community, as well as allowing individuals the opportunity to express their respect to the larger social group. As an example, the Samburu tribe understands respect as “a highly developed sense of the importance of reciprocal altruism” (Rainey, 1989, p. 792) that truly defines a human. An individual who always thinks that he/she is right, refuses to listen to the counsel of others, and only does things that he/she wants to do and would only benefit him/her is considered to be momentarily confused (at best) or insane (at worst), having disregarded respect.

Another common system found in African culture that differentiates members of the community through external status is the holding of property and wealth. Here, property and wealth takes the form of cattle. The owning and maintaining of cattle is symbolic in an interrelated two-fold way. First, possessing cattle represents the capacity
to be well-nourished and having access to immediate natural resources, both of which are vital to survival and equate to comfort and affluence. Also, cattle were regarded as extensions of the individual, as both creatures derived ultimate origins from divine creation and they mutually supported each other. Thus, cattle ownership and husbandry equated to a more spiritual affluence and unity with the natural world. For example, the Nuer tribe believed that they and their cattle were “one” and were equivalent in the contexts of ceremonial/sacrificial rituals and exchanges. Cattle in the Nuer society became another way in which to create and affirm relationships, both among each other and with divinity (Hutchinson, 1996).

As each of these ways of differentiating individuals within the community reveals, further development through ceremonial rites or level of wealth do not serve to distance individuals from the larger group. Advanced age and possession of large numbers of cattle, for instance, do not preclude individuals from interacting with the tribe or give such individuals the permission to strike out on their own. Instead, they appear to more fully cement the level of interdependence and group obligations that come with such increases in status. For many African groups, self is always regarding in relation to family or tribe in a reciprocation of duty and respect.

Asians.

Asian as a cultural label often includes the incredibly diverse groups of the Indian subcontinent (e.g., Bengalis, Burmese, Indians, Pakistanis, Sinhalese) and the myriad populations of Southeast and East Asia (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Thai, Vietnamese). The grouping of Asians in this way stemmed from the history of first
contact between Europeans and various Asian groups, labeling the lands east of European states “the Orient” (King, 1999; Said, 1991). Despite what had been a seemingly arbitrary, overgeneralized classification of a variety of groups, many of the peoples of Asia do share common aspects regarding their worldview and how self and relatedness are conceptualized culturally.

The collectivism of many Asian groups is founded upon the acceptance of a hierarchical structure in the world, both on a cosmic-natural and interpersonal-social level. These hierarchical relationships include implicit roles, obligations, and expectations regarding behavior and interaction, which becomes the basis for how self is conceived. The penultimate example of such relationships is with the family. For a number of Asian groups, family is the primary unit by which to understand a person, although the definition of family can vary greatly within Asian culture. Generally, Asian families are understood to mean the nuclear and extended families, but often fictive relationships are noted, with a variety of individuals who are not blood relatives being referred to as “aunts,” “uncles,” or “cousins” (Trawick, 1992; Wolf, 1972). Also, larger clan-like groups, which include a number of different families, may be considered family in a way that blends fictive kinship (i.e., not directly related by blood) with the behaviors and expectations given toward extended family members (e.g., Allchin & Allchin, 1982).

Thus, selfhood is understood as how an individual navigates the various roles and duties across different hierarchical sets, whether the set is the basic family structure (e.g., parent-child) or underlying cultural structures such as those based on age, gender, or larger social roles (e.g., Kitayama & Markus, 1999). The primary goals that an individual should strive for are those that promote or benefit the larger group. Personal desires are
considered valuable and worthy of time and energy in as much as they contribute to the larger group, such as young adults pursuing advanced education and successful careers to garner financial security and social status, both of which are expected to be distributed to some degree back to the larger family, instead of devoting their life to directly managing family affairs or caring for relatives (Sue & Sue, 2008). However, each Asian group, and even communities and families within those groups, dictates what individual goals are acceptable and how those goals may be appropriately achieved while still maintaining social cohesion (Kashima et al., 2004).

Even Asian spiritual and religious traditions reinforce the notion of how an individual may pursue “personal” perfection or actualization, but only as it aids in fulfilling duties and obligations to the larger society. For example, the Indian Vedic tradition included discussions on how all beings have a divinely-given spiritual duty (dharma) to fulfill in their existence and that fully engaging in that duty is among the highest virtues (Knipe, 1991; Mascaró, 1962). Also, much of the spiritual philosophy of Chinese Confucian thought had been based on how the superior individual (chün-tzu) is one who perfects oneself to understand the divinely-given order of the world such that one can be a guide for all others to thrive and fulfill their duties to family and society without unnecessary obstacles (Chan, 1963). Spiritual developments transmitted throughout the Asian continent in the form of Buddhism further challenged the intellectual and experiential concept of a distinct, essential self, which had significant resonance with the philosophical and religious foundations already in place in a number of Asian societies, contributing to the assimilation of Buddhist spirituality across the varied groups of Asia (Lopez, 1995; Strong, 1995).
Humility, harmony, and respect are strong values in many Asian groups. These virtues are reflective of countering a sense of over-importance and individuation apart from the group, as well as emphasizing the creation and nurturance of interpersonal relationships. A quality of reciprocal support is also evident. Each individual is an extension of the family whose autonomous actions benefit and honor the family. At the same time, the individual is able to work autonomously with the implicit understanding that the family is there to provide support as necessary (Chang, 2006; Sue, 2006; Sue & Sue, 2008). Although highly observed in within-family dynamics, these same virtues also guide the beliefs and behaviors of Asians in other interpersonal interactions, particularly in the domains of education and career. For instance, promoting oneself to an employer either to secure a job or to receive a promotion may be considered self-aggrandizing and egotistical, while restrained agreement with an employer’s listing of positive qualities is taken to be appropriate behavior regarding humility. Adherence to hierarchical roles and titles, such as acknowledging the innate superiority of a teacher or supervisor, is a sign of respect of the characteristics and obligations that a superior has, and to equalize one’s relationship with superiors connotes the dual assertion that the superior is undeserving of respect and the individual is much more important than his/her superior. Such behavior is also traced back to the family, as a sign that the individual’s family has raised the person poorly or without values (Ina, 2006).

Since many Asian individuals are viewed as extensions of their families and are taught to uphold the family’s reputation through their personal actions, discipline and restraint are also highly valued virtues. The most often observed example of discipline involves emotional expression (Sue, 2006). Specifically, overt displays of emotions are
equated with immaturity and displays that are done outside of the family, especially in
the presence of unfamiliar others, are seen as shameful, reflecting poorly on both the
individual and his/her family (Sue & Sue, 2008). Control of emotions in many contexts
serves to maintain harmonious relationships and cultivates a larger view of the
ramifications of personal actions (i.e., emotional expression and subsequent behaviors)
on the immediate and distal social world (Chang, 2006; Kelly & Tseng, 1992).

*Latinos.*

Although many distinct ethnic groups and their respective histories are blurred
together through the use of a broad cultural label, Latino (or Hispanic) groups have the
unique characteristic that much of their traditions combine indigenous practices and
beliefs with the socialized traditions of past oppressors (Helms & Cook, 1999).
Specifically, many Latino groups straddle the customs, values, and worldviews of the
native peoples of Latin America (i.e., Mexico, Central America, South America, and
various Caribbean island nations), which may share some level of similarity with those
groups generally classified as Native American (discussed later), and Western practices,
beliefs, and worldviews through Spanish and Portuguese Europeans. Furthermore, each
particular Latino group may identify or emphasize one or the other ‘root culture’ in
different ways or at different levels. For many of these groups, however, a syncretism has
emerged between the Latin American and European cultural heritages, with the exact
expression being different between each group. The common thread of Latin American-
European syncretism does provide some degree of thematic similarity between the
various ethnic groups that are included within the label of Latino, and those similarities will be briefly explored.

A strong theme across a variety of Latino groups is the emphasis on family and how each individual person’s identity relies heavily upon roles and duties within the family (Sue & Sue, 2008). Latino families often include extended family members, close friends, and other fictive kin. The role one has in the family is associated with particular values that the individual embodies, such as fathers being associated with responsibility, mothers with self-sacrifice, children with obedience, and grandparents with wisdom (Lopez-Baez, 2006). As everyone in the family has a role and duty, cooperation and respect are also emphasized, further nurturing the bonds within the family. This is the centerpiece of the Latino value of family unity (familismo), which ultimately becomes the groundwork which a group-based sense of self emerges.

More generalized roles, obligations, and expectations are evident within other identities, such as age and gender. Many Latino groups rely upon and value implicit hierarchies (respeto) as a way to differentiate social and cultural expectations of behavior, deference, and attitude (Constantine, Gloria, & Barón, 2006; Lopez-Baez, 2006). For instance, older adults are the most highly respected and are deferred to regarding age-based hierarchies. As mentioned previously, children are expected to be obedient and conforming to the desires and demands of their elders, which is reciprocated by parents and elders with the expectation that they will care and provide for the children up through their young adult years. Also, as children get older, they are expected to become more responsible for more and more aspects of general family life, such as contributing financially to the family when they can and providing a certain amount of
care for younger siblings. The increasing amount of responsibility to the family is considered a stabilizing factor for individual development, which is also expressed through the acceptance of marriage and childbirth early in the individual’s adult life (Sue & Sue, 2008).

Along gender lines, roles are also explicated for men and women across various Latino groups (Constantine, Gloria, & Barón, 2006). The general gender-based hierarchy places men above women, with each having cultural standards to live by. For men, the value espoused is known as machismo, which focuses on men’s roles as the provider for and protector of the family. This also has typically carried the connotation of expressing strength and dominance, sometimes being linked with behaviors such as extreme authoritarianism in maintaining rigid gender roles and hypersexuality. However, such behaviors are not necessarily a part of the spirit of machismo, which primarily focuses upon being a guiding support for the family structure. Machismo also places an expectation that a man will be able to take care of his family without both reliance from those outside of his family and limited support from those within his family; he is strong enough to make sure his family does well in whatever way he believes will be effective (Gloria, Ruiz, & Castillo, 2004).

For women, their cultural value is marianismo, which is derived from the strong Catholic influence on Latino culture in general. Marianismo comes from the idea that Latinas should emulate the Virgin Mary, who is considered the measure of womanhood (Constantine, Gloria, & Barón, 2006). Thus, women are expected to be nurturing, sentimental, gentle, and self-sacrificing. By maintaining purity modeled after the Virgin Mary and being able to endure great hardships, Latinas are considered to be spiritually
superior to men. However, as Boyd-Franklin and Garcia-Preto have noted, this state of affairs does create the paradox of women being “morally and spiritually superior to men, while [at the same time being] expected to accept male authority (quoted in Constantine et al., 2006, p. 210). In any case, the cultural expectation for Latinas is a value on being able to cultivate beneficial abnegation, especially as it may directly affect the family, and to be an embodiment of positive emotionality, forbearance, and moral rectitude (Lopez-Baez, 2006).

These general notions of selfhood are often further influenced by the prominence of Catholicism in the lives of many Latino groups. The religious-spiritual lives of Latinos often combine elements of indigenous spiritual practices (e.g., energy healing, influence of spirits, impersonal fate) and Catholic doctrine. Although Catholicism had been introduced to (or sometimes forced upon) Latino groups by European colonists and missionaries, Catholic Christianity has had a major impact in shaping the general Latino worldview, especially as Catholicism addressed more practical matters pertinent to the daily survival of Latinos in addition to spiritual topics (e.g., Boff & Boff, 1998). The addition of the Christian perspectives of salvation, charity, and faith-based endurance reinforces collectivist concepts of self evident in Latino culture, namely that the individual’s importance is measured by how he/she relates to others through reciprocation or cooperation (Yamamoto & Acosta, 1982).

Native Americans.

The term “Native American” is typically used to represent the indigenous peoples of North America, a category that includes “American Indians” – that is, Native
American groups of the contiguous 48 states of the United States and southern parts of Canada – and “Alaskan Natives” – namely, indigenous groups of Alaska and northern parts of Canada (J. McHorse, personal communication, December 8, 2008). Citing a 2005 Bureau of Indian Affairs report, Sue & Sue (2008) noted that Native Americans were composed of 561 distinct tribal affiliations, “some of which consist of only four or five members” (p. 347), illustrating the heterogeneity of the Native American cultural label. Despite such variation that exists between the many Native American tribes, some common threads can be outlined regarding the development of some shared, inter-tribal worldviews and values.

The values of sharing and cooperation inherent in the Native American expression of collectivism can be traced back to the spiritual worldview of many Native American tribes (Deloria, 1994; Helms & Cook, 1999). A common theme in the creation story of many tribes is the existence of the Great Spirit, the divine creative entity. The Great Spirit is the progenitor of the natural world, including the physical earth and all living creatures, including humanity. Unlike the creation story of the Abrahamic religions, however, the emphasis of humanity’s appearance in the world is not on a singular individual who is given the task of stewardship of the divine creation, but rather how the whole of humanity is an interconnected part of the natural world, as exemplified by a statement made by the Cayuse leader Young Chief:

The ground says, It is the Great Spirit that placed me here. The Great Spirit tells me to take care of the Indians, to feed them aright. The Great Spirit appointed the roots to feed the Indians on. The water says the same thing. The Great Spirit directs me, Feed the Indians well. The grass says the same thing, Feed the Indians well. The ground, water and grass say, the Great Spirit has given us our names. We have these names and hold these names. The ground says, The Great Spirit placed me here to produce all that grows on me, trees and fruit. The same way the ground says, It was from me man was made. The Great Spirit, in placing men on
earth, desired them to take good care of the ground and to do each other no harm. (quoted in McLuhan, 1971, p. 8)

Explicit in Young Chief’s discussion is the idea that humanity’s place in the world is one of involving the whole of humanity in cooperative interaction with nature, not one of an individual who dominates nature through naming creation and determining each entity’s purpose in relationship to humanity.

In addition to the stance of interdependence between humanity and the rest of the natural world, the general theme of interdependence finds expression in the interactions between humans, culminating in deeply held values of harmony through generosity and cooperation (Helms & Cook, 1999; Sue & Sue, 2008). For many tribes, property is considered in a collective frame, namely that any sense of property is never personal, but rather belongs to the group. Sharing of goods and materials is commonplace and is often viewed as a sign of wisdom and humility (Garrett, 2006). Also consistent with such a collective frame is the emphasis on the extended family (usually at least three generations of the family) and the tribal group as a whole. Cooperation among these groups is vital both to the physical survival of tribe and family and the moral-spiritual development of individual as he/she interacts with the group.

Family and tribal cooperation is also illustrated with the obligations embedded in age-based relationships (Garrett, 2006). Specifically, Native American elders are highly respected keepers of wisdom who take on the natural duty of caring for others. Their role as guides and teachers to younger members of the tribe in how to relate to the natural world is considered very important. In caring for the children, elders complete the circle of reciprocation, giving back to the tribe for having been cared for when they were
children. Younger Native Americans are also held in their own type of reverence, understood to be those who will carry on the traditions of the tribe as they mature.

The development of individuality for many Native American tribes is firmly based on one’s relationship to the tribe. Many tribes acknowledge the importance in developing one’s inner self, but this inner self is greatly reliant on how the individual honors relationships and flows with the natural cycles and energy of the world (Garrett, 2006). Cox conceptualizes this unique sense of self as not so much the individual living in a tribe as much as the tribe living within the person, that each individual is “the tribe’s subjective expression” (quoted in Deloria, 1994, p. 195). The idea of an individual existing apart from any sense of relationship or culture is a foreign notion in Native American traditions.
As this project is focused upon the specific theoretical orientation of Gestalt therapy, it is important to understand the philosophical and theoretical aspects of the orientation. This section will present the various lines of thought influencing Gestalt therapy theorists in the establishment and ongoing development of their particular therapeutic approach, as well as the specific philosophical foundations of the theoretical orientation. A focused introduction and examination of the theory of self maintained by Gestalt therapists and the general ramifications of self-regulation will conclude the section. This section relied upon a review of Gestalt therapy literature between 1980 and 2008 through the PsycINFO/Ovid database based primarily on the keyword of Gestalt therapy and were further filtered through examination of abstracts that emphasized or included discussions or analyses of such concepts as contact, contact boundary, creative adjustment, dialogic existentialism, dialogue, ego functioning, existentialism, field theory, figure/ground, Gestalt psychology, id functioning, intersubjectivity, organismic self-regulation, personality functioning, phenomenology, self functioning, and subjectivity. The decision to use 1980 as the starting date for the literature search was two-fold: to provide consistency with the literature review of multiculturalism (as explained in a previous section) and to rely upon relatively recent works in the therapeutic approach as much as possible. Further references were collected from the comprehensive
bibliography presented in the edited book *Gestalt Therapy: History, Theory, and Practice* (Woldt & Toman, 2005). Finally, significant aspects of this literature review were taken from the various works of Perls, especially the founding book of the orientation, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951).

The Heritage of Gestalt Therapy

Many Gestalt therapists have acknowledged in their discussions and treatises the wide range of influences and contributors to the philosophy, theory, and methodology of their orientation. The most commonly mentioned roots of Gestalt therapy include various strands of psychoanalysis, Gestalt experimental psychology, Lewin and his conception of the field, phenomenology, and various existential philosophers, such as Buber, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard (Bowman, 2005; Crocker, 2005; Perls, 1947/1969a; Yontef, 1993; Zahm & Gold, 2002). This section will be dedicated to a brief examination of these roots as a first step in understanding the philosophy and theory of Gestalt therapy.

*Psychoanalysis*

The work of Freud (1909/1961) in the development of psychoanalysis was the first major contribution to the field of modern psychology. All later developments in psychology and psychotherapy were either elaborations of psychoanalytic thought or refutations in response to Freud’s work. The roots of what would become Gestalt therapy would begin as the former, but eventually developed into the latter, becoming a distinct theoretical orientation.
One of the founders of Gestalt therapy, Frederick (Fritz) Perls, began his professional career as a psychiatrist trained in the psychoanalytic tradition. In observing his wife, Lore (Laura), feeding and weaning their children, Fritz Perls began to theorize that resistances may have their origins during the oral phase of psychosexual development rather than during the later anal stage, which was an unchallenged assertion made by Freud and accepted by the mainstream psychoanalytic community. Perls began to develop a theory of dental aggression and oral resistances, relating physical behaviors such as biting, chewing, and swallowing to ways of being in and interacting with the world psychologically. Although his theory of oral resistances would be criticized and dismissed by the psychoanalytic mainstream, Perls would eventually publish this theory in the book *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (1947/1969a). This book also included a model of therapy that addressed this new perspective of resistances, which Perls referred to as “concentration-therapy.” His concentration therapy, as acknowledged by the subtitle of later editions of the book, would become the introduction of Gestalt therapeutic methodology and practice (Bowman, 2005).

Perls and Paul Goodman, another founder of Gestalt therapy, also drew inspiration from the work of Otto Rank. One of Rank’s main contributions to psychotherapy, which would also facilitate his break with Freud and departure from mainstream psychoanalysis, was his focus on the “here and now” in therapy. For Rank, the orthodox psychoanalytic understanding of neuroses centered on repression that originated in a patient’s childhood and the approach to treat these repressions was to revisit a patient’s childhood through analysis in order to release them. The only use the present moment had in this model was to express these historical repressions through
patient transference. The psychoanalytic work would still have to be done, in a sense, in the past (Lieberman, 1993).

Rank refocused the temporality of analysis to the present moment, believing that neuroses are continually playing themselves out despite having origins in the past. Thus, it was not necessary for analysis to be done in the patient’s childhood. Instead, it was the liveliness of the patient’s present that was being hindered by his/her clinging to the past and analytic work would be better served in loosening that clinging such that the patient could fully experience the present (Lieberman, 1993). This temporal orientation would become a central component to the Gestalt therapy approach (Perls, 1947/1969a, 1970; Perls et al., 1951).

Although the founders of Gestalt therapy were heavily influenced by Rank and other psychoanalysts who asserted a more relational perspective, such as Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan, the analyst who had the most profound influence on Gestalt therapy’s development, apart from Freud, was Wilhelm Reich (Bowman, 2005). Among his various psychological works, Reich proposed a body-based theory related to an individual’s character (Reich, 1949/1976). His theory asserted that an individual’s bodily musculature served to protect the individual from perceived threats, both internal and external, in a manner consistent with the individual’s character. Reich referred to this function of musculature as “body armor” or “character armor.” Further, resistances could be worked through physically, as well as psychologically, since the armor was a physical expression of one’s own character. A corollary to the character armor theory was that the manner in which an individual communicated would also reflect his/her character. Thus, one’s style of communication was much more indicative of character and related
neuroses than the content of the communication. This was also consistent with Reich’s emphasis on emotion and affect in analysis rather than the traditional focus on intellectual content.

For Reich, successful character analysis included both relieving symptoms and providing patients with expanded choices in attending to problems and difficulties instead of relying upon rigidified responses and behaviors (Reich, 1949/1976). This position was highly consistent with Perls and Goodman’s belief that therapy should be centered upon increased response-ability rather than merely relief of discrete and superficial neurotic symptoms (Perls et al., 1951). As such, the assimilation of Reich’s character theory and body- and emotion-based work became a prominent component of the theoretical and methodological approach of Gestalt therapy.

Gestalt Psychology

Another foundational influence for the founders and developers of Gestalt therapy would be the perception work of a group of researchers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This group was known as the “Berlin school,” a reference to the fact that the majority of these researchers and their work came out of the experimental psychology laboratories of the University of Berlin. Eventually, these researchers would come to accept a new label to refer to their perceptual work: Gestalt psychology (Bowman, 2005; Yontef, 1993).

Historically, Christian von Ehrenfels had been the first to use the German term *Gestalt* in the domain of experimental psychology. Von Ehrenfels had been a student of Franz Brentano, an influential thinker in philosophy (especially phenomenology) and
psychology, who proposed the importance of unbiased descriptions of personal experience in any psychological research (Brentano, 1874/1995). Influenced by his mentor’s ideas, von Ehrenfels began to work on developing a theory of the process of perception, anchoring perception to the experience of the individual. He coined the term *Gestalt* to refer to the structured configuration of perceptual sub-elements that made up the experiential perception of an object (Bowman, 2005; Yontef, 1993). The actual German term *Gestalt* has no simple translation into English, but has been rendered by a number of terms including “configuration,” “form,” and “structure” (Zahm & Gold, 2002). The underlying concept behind the term is that the perceptual experience of an object is an active organization of sub-elements by the perceiver, creating a qualitatively distinct object (instead of a confusing mass of perceptual sub-elements).

Carl Stumpf, another student of Brentano, would become the official founder of the Berlin school, opening an experimental laboratory at the University of Berlin, which would eventually produce the bulk of research regarding the innovative perspectives on perception that fell under the label of Gestalt psychology (Ellis, 1938). Stumpf’s students, building upon the work of von Ehrenfels and other similar researchers, proposed that perception was a holistic process and could not be adequately understood by reducing perception to underlying elements and mechanisms (Koffka, 1935; Köhler, 1947; Wertheimer, 1938a). For these researchers, perception involved “wholes, the behavior of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole” (Wertheimer, 1938a, p. 2). These “wholes” were the *Gestalten* (plural of *Gestalt*) that von Ehrenfels and others
proposed, but had been further developed into a more active and non-reductionist concept.

Among the many contributions to psychology and perception made by the Gestalt psychologists was the presentation of descriptive principles in how perception is organized (Wertheimer, 1938b). Four of these basic principles (or “laws,” as they are sometimes referred to) were the factor of proximity, the factor of closure, the principle of figure/ground, and the principle of prägnanz. The factor of proximity referred to the automatic tendency of an individual to perceive disparate elements as belonging together when those elements are spatially close to each other. The factor of closure referred to the automatic tendency of an individual to perceive discontinuous or incomplete figures or forms as if such figures or forms were complete or continuous. The principle of figure/ground was a foundational concept to perceptual organization, referring to how perception is differentiated between a salient perceptual object (the “figure”) and the background (or just “ground”) from which salient perceptual objects emerge and are contextualized. Finally, the principle of prägnanz referred to the automatic tendency of an individual’s perceptual experience to become as articulated yet as simplified as possible (from the German prägnanz, “conciseness”). Perls would incorporate these principles into a working foundation when developing their theories about holism, homeostasis, and organismic self-regulation, expanding Gestalt psychologists’ findings and laws regarding perception to general psychological functioning, mental health, and psychotherapy (Bowman, 2005; Latner, 1973; Perls, 1947/1969a, 1973; Perls et al., 1951; Yontef, 1993).
Field Theory and Kurt Lewin

Much of the work of Kurt Lewin is intimately linked with Gestalt experimental psychology. Lewin, himself, was influenced by Brentano and studied under Stumpf at the Berlin school (Bowman, 2005). Gestalt therapy theorists, however, have focused more on his contributions to the social sciences. His work with field theory and its consequences for psychology and sociology are of particular interest to Gestalt theorists (Parlett, 2005).

A number of Gestalt theorists have traced back Lewin’s development of field theory to physics, specifically to Michael Faraday and James Maxwell, who first introduced the term *field* in reference to their work with magnetism (Latner, 1983; O’Neill, 2008; Parlett, 2005; Yontef, 1993; Zahm & Gold, 2002). For Faraday and Maxwell, the field was a configuration of magnetic forces that could not be perceived directly by the naked eye, but could be viewed indirectly through the effects the field had on objects. One of the more elementary experimental examples of this phenomenon is placing a magnet under a piece of paper and then sprinkling iron filings on top of the paper. The filings will be arranged into a pattern, which is a visual representation of the magnetic field.

A key component to the field in physics is the notion that any change or alteration to one part of the field affects all other parts or elements of the field, too. The field is interactional and all of the elements that make up the field are interconnected. To continue the aforementioned experimental example, moving the position of the magnet under the paper will change the pattern of the filings on top of the paper. Also, by adding additional magnets or some other metallic objects, this will also cause the filings’ pattern to change.
Possibly inspired by the concept of the field in physics, Lewin (1948/1997) began to develop a “model” of social and psychological forces that influence behavior. He referred to this model as field theory. Lewin’s field theory was less of a traditional theory and more of “a method of analyzing causal relations and of building scientific constructs” (p. 201). This included external (social) forces, as well as internal forces (e.g., needs, desires, drives), which complexly interrelate with each other in any given situation.

Further, Lewin proposed the Principle of Contemporaneity within field theory, which stated that any behavior or change in the psychological field is dependent only upon the psychological field at that particular time. Although it may appear on the surface of the proposition that Lewin was emphasizing the present moment and ignoring the influence of developmental history or future strivings on behavior, he went on to elaborate on the temporal boundary of the total field:

> It is important to realize that the psychological past and the psychological future are simultaneous parts of the psychological field existing at a given time $t$. The time perspective is continually changing. According to field theory, any type of behavior depends upon the total field, including the time perspective at that time, but not, in addition, upon any past or future field and its time perspectives. (p. 208)

Here, a core characteristic of the psychological field is what Lewin referred to as the “life space,” the culmination of the person and the psychological environment as it exists for the person. This life space allows for the individual to bring to bear the psychological elements of his/her past and future as factors within experiencing the present-oriented field. For Gestalt therapists, this allows for their here-and-now perspective to maintain the richness of those elements of their experiences that are both explicitly and implicitly salient, including that which clients may bring from their pasts or may contemplate about their futures.
Phenomenology

The role of phenomenology in Gestalt therapy cannot be understated as many Gestalt therapists often refer to or describe their approach as phenomenological (e.g., Bloom, 2001; Crocker, 2005; Yontef, 1993; Zahm & Gold, 2002). Phenomenology has a significant history within the larger domain of continental philosophy. For most writers of phenomenology, and especially for Gestalt therapy theorists, one of the most important figures of phenomenology is Edmund Husserl, who conceived of phenomenology as a subjective study of the essence of consciousness (Spinelli, 1989).

Husserl had been influenced by the positions put forth by previous philosophers, such as Brentano (1874/1995) and Immanuel Kant (Kant, 1781/1999; Seung, 2007). The Kantian-Brentano position asserted that our subjective (human) experience can only allow the knowledge of appearances of reality, as opposed to reality itself. Further, humans constantly make meaning of their experiences, regardless if the meaning imposed on an experience is reflective of the real world as it is or the real world as it appears to individuals. Despite this common aspect of human experience, all individuals will differ to some degree in their perceptions and interpretations of the world. Thus, an individual’s experience of the world is a combination of the shared perceptive elements of humanity with personalized interpretations of the world (Crocker, 2005; Spinelli, 1989).

Husserl extended this position by developing an epistemological method in an attempt to separate the shared perceptive elements with the individualized interpretative elements (Crocker, 2005; Russell, 2006; Spinelli, 1989). He sought to use experience as a starting point to extract the essential features of experience through the use of his phenomenological reductive method. This method consisted of three primary rules. The
first, the rule of *epoché*, governed the “bracketing off” of a judgment of truth or falsehood of any subjective interpretation of reality. The second rule, the rule of description, outlined the approach to describing an event or situation, namely to immediately and concretely describe the situation, distancing one’s self from adding more interpretative impressions upon the situation. The third rule, the rule of horizontalization, governed the need to avoid placing higher value or status to any described element over any other. By bracketing off truth judgments, keeping to concrete descriptions, and holding all descriptive elements as equal in value, Husserl thought that the essential features of experience could be extracted through a direct and close consideration of experience (being “experience near”) rather than speculating on and interpreting those features (being “experience far”).

Gestalt therapists have placed significant importance on Husserl’s phenomenological method, adapting it from a way of merely gaining knowledge (epistemology) to a practical method for use in mental health and psychological development (Crocker, 2005; Yontef, 1993). Also, phenomenology has had a larger influence in other domains that have impacted Gestalt therapy theory. Some examples include its role in shaping Gestalt experimental psychology, as mentioned previously; its intimate connection with the history and development of existentialism, particularly through the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger (1927/1962); and in guiding the general ontological perspectives held by some Gestalt therapists (e.g., Polster, 1998).
Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical system that begins with understanding the individual’s experience (Earnshaw, 2006). Common themes that existential philosophers have addressed in their thinking and explication have included selfhood, being and existence, consciousness, phenomenology, God, freedom and free will, ethics, nothingness, commitment, and meaning. It is the contention of many existentialists to adapt their philosophical work to the practical, everyday world that the common person engages in and struggles with.

Ironically, existentialism began as a critique of the endeavor of philosophy and the necessity of philosophical systems (Earnshaw, 2006). For instance, one of the earliest thinkers attached to existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, held that the philosophical systems that existed up through his time were abstract and detached from the lived experience of the common person (Carlisle, 2006). Kierkegaard maintained that philosophers were always revisiting the past to unify and resolve contradictions in thought, and, thus, attempted to build a secure ground upon which theories and ideas could grow. In contrast, Kierkegaard posited that humans were inherently driven to the future and that a substantial part of human existence was grappling with natural contradictions and paradoxes. Philosophy had denied and, in some cases, invalidated the actual lived experience of the individual, leaving people without the apparent need to choose how to live their life or even the realization that a choice even existed. In the case of Kierkegaard, most of his writings were devoted to elucidating choice and commitment to “life-spheres,” to nudge people out of unawareness of what it means to exist and live a truly human life.
One of the most highly associated elements of existential thought is that of being or existing. Two lines of thought regarding existence are evident in existential literature: one that has a more ontological bent, exploring the structures of “being,” and one that has a more psychological bent, relying on examinations of identity and phenomenology. The first line of thought tends to be associated with the early works from existential thinkers such as Sartre and Heidegger, while the latter lineage is discussed by almost all those associated with the existentialist perspective.

As noted previously, phenomenology found further explication through existential thought, particularly of Heidegger’s elaboration of Husserl’s work (Cerbone, 2008; Earnshaw, 2006; Heidegger, 1927/1962). Heidegger used his existentialist ideas to ground Husserl’s phenomenology in a more humanistic manner, such that it reflected the lived experience of humans. Heidegger looked to begin such elaboration by first examining the meaning of existence, or Being. He posited that Being had different modes and that to phenomenologically understand Being, he would discuss the mode of Being found with humans, namely Dasein (literally “being-there” and often rendered as “being-in-the-world”). It is the character of Dasein that humans have that contributes to a sense of meaningful self-reflection, as well as the quality of being “thrown” into situations. In navigating the world and multitude of situations, humans observe different types of objects in the world: those that are just there in the world (vorhanden; “present”) and those that are there in the world and have a particular use (zuhanden; literally “at-hand”). Further, beyond the world of objects, humans also realize the existence of others, who also have the quality of Dasein. The necessity of relationships with others reveals that being-in-the-world also intimately involves “being-with” (Mitsein). This interaction with
others is marked by a difference in relating with care (*Sorge*), as Heidegger distinguishes a sense of “concern” (*Besorgen*, literally “procurement”) when regarding useful objects in the world (*zuhanden*) and what he calls “solicitude” (*Fürsorge*, literally “caring-for”) when relating to other humans.

Although Heidegger is not the first thinker to explicate different qualities between interacting with things and people – for instance, Kant acknowledged a difference between things, which are given value and have uses, and people, who have dignity and place value on things (Seung, 2007) – his continuation of this line of thought augmented existential phenomenology and would be shared by others in the field (Crocker, 2005). Indeed, a noted tension observed in existentialist thought is the identification of being-with-others as central to being-in-the-world and yet how others can impinge upon fullest personal experience and meaningfulness (Earnshaw, 2006). Other existential thinkers, such as Buber (1923/1970) and Levinas (1969, 1999), would look to elaborate upon the conflicting roles of the other, both as being a factual factor in aiding the self-definition of the individual and being a potential source that restricted self-definition and personal responsibility.

Existentialists’ discourses about existing, identity, commitment, and choice would be taken up by Gestalt therapists in their theory. The positing of the need to make active choices as a part of living a full, whole life would mesh well with Gestalt therapy theorists’ ideas about broadening one’s response-ability through heightened awareness of needs and environmental support. Also, Gestalt therapists’ ideas about self, particularly how self emerges through contact between the organism and the environment, parallels existential notions about how existing is being-in-the-world and being-with-others.
Philosophical Foundations of Gestalt Therapy

The philosophical and theoretical heritage of Gestalt therapy is an eclectic domain, but Gestalt therapy theorists and commentators were able to take in these varied ideas and concepts and put forth a theoretical approach implementable to the practice of psychotherapy. A number of Gestalt therapists have proposed that their orientation’s theory and practice rests upon three philosophical foundations, namely phenomenology, field theory, and dialogic existentialism (Yontef, 1993; Zahm & Gold, 2002). Although elements of each of those philosophical foundations have been briefly introduced previously, the following will more deeply elaborate upon each foundation as it pertains directly to Gestalt therapy.

Clinical Phenomenology

Husserl’s phenomenology, especially his proposed phenomenological reduction, was formulated as an epistemological tool, a way to cultivate knowledge about objects in the world through a specialized system of adjusting subjectivity. The challenge for Gestalt therapists, then, was to translate Husserl’s epistemological method into something that had practical use for psychotherapy, something that would facilitate healing and growth. Thus, the three components of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction were reinterpreted and implemented in a specific way for the practice of Gestalt therapy (Crocker, 2005; Yontef, 1993).

The “bracketing off” of subjective judgments of truth or falsehood (epoché) was focused upon the meaning and understanding that clients gave to their narratives and the events in their lives. Gestalt therapists would not be concerned about whether the content
given by clients was true or false, but understanding their content on its own terms. For the Gestalt therapist, this meant being able to “bracket off” his/her own judgments about truth and falsehood. Personal meaning for the Gestalt therapist was also to be “placed to the side” when understanding clients’ stories, deferring to how the clients themselves understood those narratives and what meaning they attributed to them.

The second component of the phenomenological reduction, the emphasis on description over interpretation, would be the means by which Gestalt therapists were able to understand the meaning that clients attributed to the events and people in their lives. This stance also helped reduce the likelihood of therapists imposing their own meanings and judgments on clients’ content. For Gestalt therapists, importance was placed on becoming as experience-near as possible so that clients could increase their awareness of their experiences and naturally develop creative ideas about how to navigate situations and contexts.

Unlike the previous components, the principle of horizontalization from Husserl’s system would need the most adaptation from being an epistemological tool to a becoming a therapeutic instrument (Crocker, 2005; Yontef, 1993). Husserl’s perspective held that all phenomenological data was to be given equal weight, with no one specific piece being judged as more valuable or important than any other. However, psychotherapy involves the need to make sense of client-given information for the purposes of facilitating psychological health, which also involves some manner of intervention. Intervention necessarily includes being able to evaluate and assess, which are processes that are constructed to focus on particular elements or data over others.
Crocker (2005) elaborated that Gestalt therapists add a “twist” to the implementation of horizontalization in therapy:

A Gestalt therapist brings to the meeting with a client a ground of personal and professional understanding, experience, and skill that greatly influences responses to the client. The therapist pays attention to some things that seem more significant than others; some aspects of the way the client tells his story pique curiosity and suggest ways of exploration, whereas others do not… During the course of the therapeutic process, the therapist is aware of “wisps of theory” that weave in and out of her awareness and entertains “working hypotheses” and hunches as the client tells his story… She does not cling to any of these thoughts or become fixed on any provisional diagnostic category, specific procedure, or agenda. Rather, the therapist constantly revises the assessment of the client as he reveals himself more and at greater depth. (pp. 69-70)

This process allows for Gestalt therapists to maintain a phenomenological stance without sacrificing the therapeutic quality of their work. Although phenomenological inquiry in Gestalt therapy does involve gathering knowledge, it is done from an understanding that the information collected will allow for avenues and directions to intervene with clients to address their presenting concerns.

Field Theory

One of the qualities that appealed to Gestalt therapists about field theory was its general compatibility with similar themes in Gestalt psychology regarding a more interactive process in understanding relationships and the interplay of different factors in shaping events and situations. Lewin’s (1948/1997) importation of the field from physics into the social sciences matched a more holistic perspective, incorporating context and a variety of external and internal forces in modeling behavior. Although such a field theory has become one of the primary foundations for Gestalt therapy theory and practice, a comprehensive and shared idea of the implications of field theory has been lacking.

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among Gestalt therapists. Two interconnected lines of thinking about field theory have been observed, one concerned with understanding and defining a field (i.e., what is a field?) and the other concerning the ramifications of taking a field theoretical approach within Gestalt therapy (i.e., what is field theory?). Each of these lines will be briefly explored.

One of the first mentions of “a field” within Gestalt therapy literature was in the orientation’s “founding book,” Gestalt Therapy (Perls et al., 1951). Specifically, the field considered was the “organism/environment field,” the “place” where the individual organism interacts with its contextual surroundings. The presentation of the organism/environment field served to acknowledge that an accurate assessment and understanding of human behavior had to consider the individual in context, as opposed to being isolated from its situatedness. Further, human behavior was not solely a physical interaction between organism and environment, but that the organism/environment field included other aspects of human experience: “So in any humane study… we must speak of a field in which at least social-cultural, animal, and physical factors interact” (p. 228).

A more general definition of a field has been offered by Yontef as “a totality of mutually influencing forces that together form a unified interactive whole” (1993, p. 295). At the same time, he and others have acknowledged that there are a variety of fields that can be classified and observed (Francis, 2005; Yontef, 2002). Some of the fields identified and discussed have included the embodied field (Kepner, 2003), the erotic field (O’Shea, 2003), the phenomenal field (Kennedy, 2003), and the oft-examined phenomenological field (e.g., Jacobs, 2003; Wheeler, 2000; Yontef, 1993). Here, the
specific purpose of the field being considered defines and shapes the field itself (Parlett, 2005).

Each field is organized around an orienting structural theme that both provides the “ground” to examine a specific form of emerging figures (Wheeler, 1991) and becomes a “figure” itself, an emphasis for one or more aspects of the whole human (Parlett, 1997). Although many fields can be identified, delineated, and explored, the particular perspective taken by Gestalt therapists in focusing on any specific field at any given time is guided by clinical phenomenology. In other words, the specific field examined in working with clients is in part determined by salient figures presented by clients. Following the figure presented, Gestalt therapists then bring their awareness, as well as the awareness of their clients, to the qualities of the greater field from which the figure emerges. At the same time, Gestalt therapists also hold lightly the selection of the field in the situation, ready to deepen work within the field being explored if its resonates fully with clients and their particular figures or set it aside for another figure/field that better suits clients’ current subjective experience. In this sense, despite the specific field structures emphasized, the field of experience is always an experiential field, based on the subjective, lived experience of the individual (Kepner, 2003). However, as it is a field, it is not merely an intrapsychic, passively-receiving system, but rather an interactive, unifying whole as experienced by the individual. Thus, Lewin’s “life space” is equivalent to a general sense of the field as phenomenal (Staemmler, 2006).

For example, if a client begins his session by acknowledging a physical sensation of pain in his shoulders and neck, such a figure may indicate a natural exploration of body and somatic experience (i.e., the embodied field). Thus, awareness may be
heightened to fully experience those pains; exploration of other sensations, feelings, or meanings that relate to those pains may be done; and/or experiments may be enacted to experience the pain differently or to relate to the body in this situation in a new and fresh way. However, should initial awareness-building, exploration, and/or experimentation yield a new, livelier figure for the client that incorporates or transitions to another field, then the therapist may follow the client to this new figure and the field it is a part of. Despite this potential movement from one field to another, the therapist still lightly holds the importance of the previous field, particularly as it is one of many fields which the client can understand himself or organize his experience around.

Ever since the explicit discussions of field theory in Gestalt therapy literature, particularly with the writings of Latner (1983, 2008), Parlett (1991, 1997, 2005), Wheeler (1991, 2000, 2005), and Yontef (1993), there has been interest in and examination of the wider consequences and ramifications of taking a field theoretical approach to psychotherapy (and other intellectual and practical domains) and how such an approach contrasts with other perspectives and paradigms regarding reality. In such discussions, field theory is debated as to whether it solely stands as a way of knowing about the world (epistemology) or if it delineates a specific reality or way of the world (ontology). One major consequence of the latter position would be the unification of various fields of study within the sciences and the fruition of a new paradigm of reality, one where, for instance, human relatedness is not between two discrete entities that “collide” at moments in time like billiard balls, but rather by inseparable aspects of an entirety (field), where essential differences are taken to be abstractions. Conversely, the former position would
not directly enter into such discussions about the natural of reality, instead focusing more on experience of the world rather than reality itself (Meara, 2008).

Most Gestalt therapists acknowledge that Lewin, who was one of the initial figures to examine the concept of the field in the social sciences, presented and understood field theory as an epistemology (O’Neill, 2008). For a number of Gestalt therapists, this epistemological stance is retained, holding that field theory is a “framework… for examining and elucidating events, experiencing objects, organisms and systems as meaningful parts of a knowable totality of mutually influencing forces that together form a unified interactive continuous whole” (Yontef, 1993, p. 321). Yet some Gestalt therapists have challenged this position by asserting that field theory describes a reality that truly exists, citing the references made by Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) of the organism/environment field. For these Gestalt therapists, the organism/environment field found in Gestalt Therapy appears to be a felt reality rather than a model to understand interactions in the world (Latner, 1983, 2008; O’Neill, 2008).

Although this debate regarding what field theory is has ramifications for potentially unifying the disparate sciences (if a more ontological view is accepted), the positions have a larger impact on how Gestalt therapists, based on their theory, understand and conceptualize individuals, selfhood, and relatedness. Beyond using field theory to acknowledge the myriad of force and influences in a given context that give rise to particular experiences (the epistemological view), questions about the existential quality of self could be addressed – such as if self exists as a structured core or if self is merely a concept or abstraction without any inherent essence – which would then further inform clinical conceptualization, treatment, and avenues for intervention (the ontological
view). For proponents of the field theory-as-ontology position, the field theoretical approach could lend increased scientific legitimacy to psychology (and Gestalt therapy, specifically) that other natural sciences have, as well as become the means to get at the underlying structures of being. The proponents of the field theory-as-epistemology position would maintain that this is not the appropriate understanding and use of field theory and that such an implementation may ignore the significant differences between categories and concepts found within psychology and the natural sciences.

Both lines of thought about field theory – defining what a field is and the ramifications of a field theory – have important implications in the larger philosophy of psychology and the practice of psychotherapy. They also have a significant influence on conceptualizations of self and interpersonal/intersubjective experience. Further examination of field theory will be discussed later, particularly as it pertains to different cultural perspectives of selfhood and relatedness.

*Dialogic Existentialism*

As previously mentioned, Gestalt therapy theory is heavily influenced by Western existentialist thought, especially the elaborations upon phenomenology made by philosophers such as Heidegger (1927/1962). Combining phenomenology, existentialism, and a psychological theory based on contact with the environment, Gestalt therapy theorists found significant resonance with the thought of Buber (1923/1970), who put forth an existential position focused on the various types of relationships between humans. For Buber, individuals are always defined in their mode of being by their relationships, such that to speak of an individual (“I”) in isolation is meaningless.
Individuals always exist regarding relationships, even if it entails the avoidance or denial of connection with other humans. Of particular interest to Gestalt therapists were two modes of relating described by Buber: I-It and I-Thou. These modes of relating would be the centerpiece for Gestalt therapists to integrate existentialism with relatedness in a manner which could inform clinical interactions, namely dialogic existentialism (or sometimes referred to as just dialogue).

Dialogic existentialism is founded upon the idea that all experiences of individual existence occur in relation with others in particular modes. The I-It mode is one that is characterized by task completion, whereby other individuals are ‘means’ by which a person achieves a designated objective. I-It relationships do not necessarily involve complete dehumanization of another, reducing other individuals to something like inanimate objects. However, a personal goal is at the heart of such a way of relating, which makes relating to others on a deeper, fully human level difficult or even counterproductive to the task at hand. The I-Thou (or I-You) mode is one that is characterized by recognizing the humanness of another and sharing one’s own humanness with the other. There is no concrete objective or task to be achieved in such relationships. Also known as a dialogic relationship in the Gestalt therapy literature, the I-Thou relation is very present-centered and focused on mutuality between individuals. Generally, I-It relationships guide the practical aspects of living, while I-Thou relationships are the core of the realization of personhood (Jacobs, 1989).

These modes of relating are necessary to human interactions and are often in constant fluctuation. For Buber, humans cannot live without I-It relationships, but “whoever lives with only that is not human” (1923/1970, p. 85). Hycner (1985)
specifically proposed that balancing between I-It and I-Thou modes in one’s life is the key to healthy living. Yet, the I-Thou mode is of particular interest for Gestalt therapists, specifically because it involves the mutual experience of humanness between individuals, an experience that is thought to be healing in its own right and, thus, something to strive for in therapy. In Gestalt therapy writings on I-Thou, however, authors have made a concerted effort to distinguish two interrelated aspects of I-Thou that are often confused: the I-Thou moment and the I-Thou relation (e.g., Jacobs, 1989; Yontef, 1998). Although both are important aspects of I-Thou, more of an emphasis will be placed on the I-Thou relation (which is often what is referred to by the term dialogue; cf. Hycner, 1985) in this study, although the I-Thou moment will be briefly examined.

The I-Thou moment is but one type of experience characterizing human relatedness (Buber, 1923/1970; Hycner, 1985). It is conceived of as a “special moment of insight or illumination wherein the participants confirm each other in their unique being” (Jacobs, 1989, p. 29), the “highest moment” in a given human interaction (Hycner, 1985, p. 28). In the I-Thou moment, a full sense of contact is experienced, endowing the interaction with liveliness and deep emotionality. Often, this moment is described as a loosening or softening of individual boundaries or, as Friedman noted, a “lack of measure, continuity and order” (quoted in Jacobs, 1989, p. 60). In such a moment, there is a mutual surrender by participants to the moment itself, rather than using the moment as a means to some objective or goal. An implicit reliance or trust is felt in that moment, a moment that is contingent on the participants but is irreducible to solely the participants themselves. In this form of contact, then, one’s fullest being is deeply experienced and expressed, and one’s humanity is fully realized (Buber, 1923/1970). It is this quality of
the I-Thou moment that have led some Gestalt therapists to emphasize the ontic impact of
contact and to concentrate on the structures and dynamics of contact (e.g., Polster &

The I-Thou relation, also referred to in Gestalt literature as the I-Thou process,
describes the interhuman process of relatedness. As mentioned previously, the various
modes of relating are always in constant flux and that reliance on any one mode as the
guiding way to solely relate is insufficient. However, all modes involve individuals
relating with others in some manner and it is this manner which distinguishes the quality
of each mode from the other. This general give-and-take of the various modes of
relatedness led Hycner (1985) to propose that the preferred term of dialogue should be
used instead of reliance on I-Thou relationship. Among his criticisms of I-Thou
relationship to refer to the general process of interacting was that it may unreasonably
emphasize the I-Thou moment at the expense of the greater context of interhuman
experience, that the I-Thou moment is only one aspect of all natural and healthy human
interactions. Retention of the term I-Thou relationship (or I-Thou process) in early
Gestalt therapy literature (e.g., Jacobs, 1989; Yontef, 1993), apart from Hycner’s
writings, appears to be in service of the adaptation of this specific way of contacting to
the therapy situation. Still, it seems that Hycner’s early concerns have been fully
integrated into general Gestalt therapy literature, as most authors refer to dialogue or the

For Gestalt therapists, the role of the dialogic relationship in therapy has the overt
quality of cultivating an egalitarian relationship between client and therapist. In Gestalt
therapy theory, clients’ pathology and presenting concerns are not due to intrapsychic
phenomena beyond their control – either something within them that a therapist must take away or something lacking within them that a therapist must implant – but rather are impacted by clients’ lack of or limited awareness about themselves as a totality and/or rigidified ways of being in (or avoiding) contact with aspects of themselves and others. Thus, the stereotypical arrangement of clients being in the role of the sick and helpless person and therapists placed in the role as omniscient experts and sole change agents for clients is immediately challenged because of how this further reinforces clients’ compromised or problematic functioning.

Hinted in the frame of the egalitarian, dialogic relationship in Gestalt therapy is the theory of change from which Gestalt therapists work. The implicit elements of Gestalt therapy’s theory of change are found in much of the early literature of the approach, but had not been explicitly discussed until Beisser’s (1970) seminal work that coined its name: the paradoxical theory of change. Briefly, Beisser observed “that change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not” (p. 77). Thus, clients come to therapy already in internal conflict between fragmented elements within themselves – such as a top-dog/underdog conflict as described by Perls (1969b) – and seek to refashion the therapeutic relationship to resemble that internal conflict. Placed in the role as “changer,” therapists are the “top-dog,” barking authoritarian proscriptions under the guise of therapeutic prescriptions for the more submissive, passive clients (as the “underdog”) to take in without question. For Gestalt therapists, this state of affairs is not very therapeutic and may even reinforce the maladaptive behaviors clients are trying to rid themselves of. Instead, Gestalt therapists are guided by their paradoxical change theory to experiment with clients about being as fully themselves in the moment as
possible. In the case of internal conflicts, therapists may also facilitate clients experimenting with fully taking on each perspective or role. Having clients fully experience their current state, whether it is distressful or serene, serves to heighten clients’ awareness about themselves, empowering them with the realization that they can be their own agents of change and make responsible decisions about how to navigate their lives based on their given context. However, this paradoxical change theory can only be fully realized in therapeutic practice through cultivation of a dialogic relationship, whereby therapists can acknowledge the humanness of clients and clients are able to do the same in relating both to themselves and their therapists (Yontef, 2005).

Buber’s dialogical existential perspective was incorporated into the unique interpersonal environment of psychotherapy by recasting his elements of the general I-Thou process into the principles of dialogue in Gestalt therapy (Jacobs, 1989; Yontef, 1993, 2005). Different authors (and sometimes the same author across different articles) have outlined varying numbers of principles, but it appears that four principles are generally common to all Gestalt therapists: presence, inclusion, confirmation, and commitment (Yontef, 1998). Presence involves therapists showing their “true selves” to their clients, being fully authentic in their interactions. Caring, warmth, and respect are communicated to clients but only if they are genuinely experienced by therapists. Presence carries elements outlined in the thought and practice of other humanistic approaches (e.g., Rogers, 1961). Inclusion is the practice of therapists placing themselves as fully into the experiences of clients, a fullest sense of clients’ phenomenology. However, at the same time, therapists also must balance their felt approximation of clients’ experiences with maintaining their own experiences and senses of self.
Confirmation extends the elements of inclusion to deep acknowledgement of the existence of clients as whole humans, rather than just the mere appearance they present in the immediate moment. Confirmation balances acceptance of clients as they are in their totality and the potentiality for growth that exists for clients. Finally, commitment refers to a general commitment to dialogue. This means surrendering to whatever may emerge in the interaction between clients and therapists without an aim to control the outcome. This acknowledges the mutual influence that each participant’s phenomenology has on the other and maintains an atmosphere of horizontalization between the participants, such that one (often therapists) avoids trying to lead the other (often clients) to some specified viewpoint or convinces them that their reality is wrong or flawed in some way that invalidates their overall experience.

The emphasis on dialogue is another foundation for the relational perspective from which Gestalt therapists theorize and work. It allows for Gestalt therapists to act phenomenologically in a theoretically intentional manner in their work with clients, as well as usefully blend the mutual influences of the personal/intrapsychic with the interpersonal/environmental regarding human experience and behavior. Embedded in the dialogical perspective, however, are paradoxes about selfhood and relatedness, such as the dynamics of inclusion in the dialogic process. The impact of dialogue as it relates both theoretically and practically in the discussions of self and relatedness and potential directions of how it can attend to differences in cultural perspectives of self-other will be examined further later.
Self and Self-Regulation

As already presented, Gestalt therapy theorists were inspired and influenced by many strands of thought in philosophy and psychology, incorporating these strands into the primary philosophical approach for Gestalt therapy practice. Having explored the intellectual heritage and philosophical foundations of Gestalt therapy, a fuller examination of the other grounding principles and theories of the orientation will follow. Emphasis will be placed on the Gestalt therapy theory of self, particularly considering how such a theory of self relies upon awareness of needs and contact with the environment, and how this process is delineated in the Gestalt therapy principle of organismic self-regulation.

Gestalt Therapy Theory of Self

According to Perls and Goodman, the self is understood as the “complex system of contacts necessary for adjustment in the difficult field” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 375) or, likewise, “the system of creative adjustments” (p. 247). Inferring from these two definitions, Gestalt therapists have emphasized the functionality of self as the basic view in understanding and working with selfhood. The theory of self presented within Gestalt therapy views self as a process, albeit a process that has an element of internal consistency (i.e., structure), and that the primary focus in understanding self is how it both makes contact with the environment and emerges from that contact (Perls, 1969b; Perls et al., 1951; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2005; Yontef, 1993; cf. Tobin, 1982). Thus, another key characteristic, and striking paradox, of self is how it can exist as a core structure (i.e.,
an agent or system that makes contact with things) and as a boundary phenomenon (i.e., something emerging from the act of contacting).

Echoing similar ideas as found in *Gestalt Therapy*, Yontef (1993) acknowledged that self cannot be conceived as distinct from the organism/environment field. Although self’s “concrete subject-matter is always an organism/environment field” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 372), it can become emergent in contact by nature of being a process instead of a fixed structure existing outside of interaction (Jacobs, Philippson, & Wheeler, 2007). It is in contact with the environment where the self “occurs” or becomes highly “activated” (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2005).

Perls et al. (1951) outlined three functions of self that account for the manner in which self is organized, particularly around specific experiences: the id, the personality, and the ego. Despite the retention of psychoanalytic terms regarding these structures of self, Gestalt therapists recast these structures as functions and described them in phenomenological terms (Yontef, 1993). This triumvirate is the system of “special structures for special purposes” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 378), namely for contact through creative adjustments.

In describing the id function, Spagnuolo Lobb (2005) noted:

The id function is defined as the organism’s capacity to make contact with the environment by means of (a) the sensory-motor background of assimilated contacts; (b) physiological needs; and (c) bodily experiences and sensations that are perceived “as if inside the skin” (including past unfinished situations). (p. 28)

Id functioning has also been described as “playful, devoid of volition” with an almost automatic felt sense of being “acted upon by and responsive to the environment” (Latner, 1973, p. 60). Generally, id functioning is related directly to the needs and desires of the individual, particularly an individual’s awareness of such needs and desires. Any
difficulties or disturbances involving id functioning tend to involve unawareness of needs or insensitivity to bodily experience, including emotionality. Returning to the figure/ground concepts that Gestalt therapists integrated from Gestalt experimental psychologists, id functioning relates to the interactive background between individual and environment, such as assimilated contacts and physiological needs. Impaired id functioning makes clear figure formation difficult, since bodily experience is not fully sensed by the individual, handicapping the individual in adequately attending to a figure (need) regarding the environmental context presented.

Personality functioning is defined as “the system of attitudes assumed in interpersonal relations; is the assumption of what one is, serving as the ground on which one could explain one’s behavior, if the explanation were asked for” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 382). This “verbal replica of the self” essentially answers the implicit question of ‘Who am I?’ As such, the oft-unspoken answer to this question becomes the expression of self in how it makes contact with the environment. A given style of personality functioning establishes a different way for one self to organize relationships with the environment compared to another self with its own style of personality functioning. When difficulties or disturbances in personality functioning arise, these tend to emphasize how needs or desires (id functioning) are expressed in the environment based on identified qualities or characteristics. To return again to the figure/ground language, though a figure might be clearly formed (presuming satisfactory id functioning), the manner in which contact with the environment is engaged to satisfy the need may be inhibited or done in a way that is not fully satisfying, despite environmental support that may actually facilitate fuller attention to the figure.
Like personality functioning, ego functioning also expresses a specific capacity of the self in contacting the environment. However, for ego functioning, this capacity is the deliberate and active identification and alienation of self with aspects of the environmental field. Thus, ego functioning implicitly asserts “This is (or for) me” and “This is not (or not for) me” and acts appropriately, rather than answering the unasked question of identity that is the domain of personality functioning. This characteristic of acting in the environment relies upon clear awareness of needs (id functioning) and identified acceptance of such needs (personality functioning). Ego functioning takes these other aspects of self and uses them as guides to express self through acting in the environment, specifically in the process of contacting the environment. It follows that difficulties or disturbances in either (or both) id functioning or personality functioning disrupts ego functioning. On the level of ego functioning, this is observed as difficulties in contacting the environment, which have been described by Gestalt therapists in the form of a number of contact boundary disturbances (e.g., Perls et al., 1951; Polster & Polster, 1973), which will be discussed in more detail later.

As noted previously, the various definitions and conceptualizations of self by Gestalt therapists all include the active process of contacting, particularly an organism contacting the environment. For the founders of Gestalt therapy, contact “is the simplest and first reality” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 227), a theoretical manner in which to describe how self exists and how energy is used in and sequences through individual experience (Melnick, Robine, Schack, & Spinelli, 2007). Contact had been understood to take place at a boundary between organism and environment, which paradoxically provides the foundation for both separation (i.e., boundaries distinguish isolatable objects from each
other) and connection (i.e., boundaries are where isolatable objects touch each other). Likewise, the process of contact involved both an organism being drawn to the contact boundary to ‘touch’ the environment, as well as the organism withdrawing from the environment upon the assimilation of the fullness of the encounter (Perls et al., 1951; Polster & Polster, 1973; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2005; Yontef, 1993).

Further, Perls and Goodman conceptualized contact as “the forming of a figure of interest against a ground or context of the organism/environment field” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 231). For an organism to creatively attend to personal needs through the environment, a clear figure (need) is necessary, such that energy could be effectively mobilized through adequate behavior to satisfy the need. Perls and Goodman presented a four-phase model of the contacting process: fore-contact, contacting, final contact, and post-contact. They acknowledged that the process of contact is a single whole, but that dividing the process into four parts was done to theoretically illustrate the sequence of how the figure/ground process develops throughout contacting.

*Fore-contact* is the initial stage in the contact sequence, whereby excitation from an experienced need becomes figural, the body being the background to the figural need. Fore-contact has a similar quality to the id functioning of the self in that it is “what is aware as the ‘given’… of the situation” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 403). In the *contacting* phase, self becomes more fully emergent and expands toward the contact boundary with the environment. The first aspect of the contacting phase finds the excitation from the given need shift from figure to ground, as the individual scans and explores the environment for an object or set of possibilities to satisfy the need. Such an object or set of possibilities become the new figure during this time and the initial background of the
body diminishes. The second aspect of the contacting phase is characterized by choosing and rejecting from the set of possibilities, redirecting energy (or, to use Perls’ term, aggression) to approach the chosen possibility and overcome any hindrances or obstacles to the approach. In a similar way that id functioning is associated with fore-contact, the contacting phase has a quality of ego functioning in that this phase involves identification and alienation, determining what aspects of the environment are “for” or “not for” the organism in attending to the experienced need.

It is in the final contact phase that contacting the environment becomes the figure, while the other aspects of the environment and body that are “unconcernful” to the interaction become background (Perls et al., 1951, p. 403). Self is fully present and occupied with the contacting action during this phase. Deliberateness is relaxed because there is nothing to choose or discriminate upon at this phase. In final contact, the actions of perception, motion, and feeling are unified in a spontaneous manner and awareness is expansive in the contacting act. The last phase of post-contact is characterized by assimilating the novel experiences derived from the final contact phase, which contributes to the growth of the overall organism. This “flowing organism/environment interaction that is not a figure/background” takes place without awareness as integration occurs (Perls et al., 1951, p. 404). From the heightened awareness of the previous phase, in post-contact awareness declines as self diminishes, withdrawing from the contact boundary such that assimilation may come to fruition.

Although Gestalt therapy had been established with the contact sequence, some Gestalt therapists believed that early theorists had privileged contact in the much larger context of total human experience (Melnick, Robine, Schack, & Spinelli, 2007), which
may have contributed to the presentation of a revised model outlining how energy sequences through the various aspects of experience. This new model became known as the *cycle of experience* or the Cleveland model, as its development came from theorists at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (Latner, 1983; Yontef, 1993; Zinker, 1977). In the cycle of experience, contact is merely one phase of a multiphase model. The number of phases in the cycle of experience often varies among different authors. For instance, Zinker (1977) outlines six stages in his presentation of the cycle (although the last identified stage consists of a number of subphases, each of which could be differentiated into distinct phases), while Woldt and Toman (2005) rely upon a seven-phase model. In discussing the cycle of experience, the seven-phase model will be used.

The first phase of the cycle of experience is *sensation*, the bodily feelings sensed by the individual. Like the analogous phase of fore-contact, the sensation phase involves the id of the situation, the “given” of bodily and physiological feelings. Sensation gives rise to the next phase, *awareness*, where the individual describes, defines, and interprets the sensations experienced. For example, it is in the awareness phase where an individual interprets a particular experience of abdominal discomfort and tightened neck muscles as “anxiety.” Awareness continues the process of need satisfaction by more fully identifying the need in question. After awareness of the need is achieved, the next phase of *excitement* takes place. Here, excitement refers to a drawing upon and mobilization of energy in the means of satisfying the identified need. The most common expression of this excitement phase is scanning the environment to determine if the environment can provide an object or set of possibilities to satisfy the need, much like the initial subphase of the contacting stage in the aforementioned contact sequence. Also, the excitement
phase shares the quality of ego functioning like in the contacting stage, in that a
determination of which of the set of possibilities are appropriate for the individual in
satisfying the need or would be inappropriate given the situation.

The following phase, the *action* phase, involves the individual intentionally acting
in the environment to encounter the selected object that would satisfy the need. The
*contact* phase comes next and features the individual interacting with the object from the
environment. The contact phase is analogous to the final contact stage in the previous
model, when aggression into the environment is fully expressed. After contacting the
satisfying object or aspect of the environment, *integration* of the contact takes place,
whereby the experience is assimilated into the individual. This phase can also include the
individual determining if the selected object was adequate in addressing the experienced
need. In any case, whether the need is fully satisfied or not, the experience is integrated
into the individual, adding to previously assimilated contacts and providing important
information for future episodes of attending to similar needs. The final phase of the cycle
of experience, *closure*, is characterized by the individual withdrawing from
environmental contact and having ideally satisfied the need in question. This then allows
for the individual to become sensitive to another need, which begins the cycle of
experience anew. These latter two phases of the cycle of experience are generally
analogous to the post-contact stage of the contact sequence as explicated in *Gestalt
Therapy* (Perls et al., 1951).
Organismic Self-Regulation

Both the four-phase contact sequence and the cycle of experience elaborate upon a general process whereby an individual naturally responds to both an internally felt need and the externally experienced environment. Perls (1947/1969a) first presented this process by relying upon an analogy in the biological sciences, noting how all organisms attempt to maintain a sense of balance or homeostasis (cf. Resnick, 2008). Typically, maintaining such a balance involves either putting something out into the environment (in the case of internal surplus) or taking something in from the environment (in the case of internal deficit). Perls referred to this natural process as *organismic self-regulation* and broadened it from describing how organisms meet basic biological-physiological needs into how individuals meet any experienced need or desire.

Perls and other early Gestalt therapy theorists also recast this process of organismic self-regulation into the inherited terminology from the perceptual findings of Gestalt psychology, namely in terms of the presence of a figure against a background. Identified needs were the initial figures with all other elements of the individual and the environment being the background. As previously discussed, Perls and Goodman outlined how the exact figure and background changes and shifts throughout the different stages of engaging the environment to satisfy a given need in their contact sequence (Perls et al., 1951). In addition to the introduction of Gestalt psychological terms in describing need satisfaction and the process of contacting, Gestalt therapy theorists also realized how individuals’ natural tendency to conceptually complete perceptual data that is incomplete or organize seemingly disparate perceptual data in the simplest and most articulate way could be broadened to experienced needs. Namely, individuals have a
similar tendency to want to satisfy needs in much the same way that they complete unfinished perceptual figures. When individuals are unable to satisfy needs, such unfinished figures remain in individuals’ backgrounds, with a recurrent, lingering desire to complete those figures that can impact the ability for individuals to satisfy other needs in a given moment.

Gestalt therapists characterized organismic self-regulation as being free of deliberation, that all organisms “will spontaneously regulate themselves” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 247) when satisfying needs. The ideal model of organismic self-regulation is that the organism will have a fully integrated sensory-motoric response to an identified need and that the environment will be able to offer an object to satisfy the need, which the organism can directly engage, make contact with, and assimilate (Latner, 1973; Polster & Polster, 1973). In addition to an environment not readily presenting objects to satisfy given needs, individuals can experience difficulties in directly addressing needs through disturbances in any of the aforementioned self functions. Despite the exact cause or exacerbating quality that inhibits an individual from directly meeting a need, humans benefit from being adaptive to different contexts. Individuals attend to difficulties in directly addressing needs in a given situation by using a creative adjustment. A creative adjustment is an individual’s “best adaptation to dealing with feelings and needs in response to environmental inadequacy in meeting the needs, or competing environmental requirements” (Zahm & Gold, 2002, p. 863).

This beneficial characteristic that individuals possess can also be a detriment. Typically, creative adjustments work best when an individual has awareness of his/her needs and the environmental situation. Further, creative adjustments are context-based, a
useful adaptation to a specific state of affairs. However, when individuals use creative adjustments without awareness and sensitivity to each situation, such adaptations become rigidified modes of behaving, which may not adequately attend to their needs. Thus, the creative adjustment loses its adaptive quality and leaves the individual frustrated with an unsatisfied need. When creative adjustments become formulaic responses instead of spontaneous adaptations, such adjustments leave their mark by affecting the self functions of the individual, whether it takes the form of difficulties in being aware of needs (id functioning) or interacting with the environment (personality or ego functioning). Perls and Goodman (Perls et al., 1951) delineated five common ways that individuals interrupt contact with the environment: introjecting, retroflecting, projecting, confluence, and egotism. However, since this presentation, later Gestalt therapy theorists have re-examined such a conceptualization. For example, when Polster and Polster (1973) revisited these resistances to contact, they introduced deflection (or deflecting) as one of these contact boundary interruptions, replacing egotism from the earlier discussion of Perls et al. Further, these interruptions to contact would need to be reinterpreted as “phenomena” since the concept of “resistance” was contrary to Gestalt therapy theory (Breshgold, 1989), and these contact boundary resistances could even be used in healthy and adaptive ways (Wheeler, 1991, 2000). A brief description of the six contact boundary phenomena follows.

*Introjecting* is a process of passively incorporating what the environment provides, typically by relying upon some proscription or rule. The individual does not assimilate that which is introjected, merely taking in introjects without any assertion of personal preference. *Retroflecting* involves turning one’s aggression (energy) back onto
one’s self instead of appropriately putting it forth into the environment to meet needs. For instance, an individual who has been slighted or hurt by another and blames him/herself instead of getting angry with the other person is retroreflecting. *Projecting* is a dual process whereby an individual disowns an aspect of the self and attributes the disowned aspect as a quality of the environment. *Confluence* is the merging of or lack of differentiation between self and other, such that individual preferences and experiences are ignored for the preferences and experiences from another. The preferences and experiences of others are taken to be one’s own with the individual heavily relying upon others for guidance regarding identification and satisfaction of needs. *Egotism* involves the denying of the novelty of a given situation, particularly after contact, such that the experience is not fully assimilated into the being of the individual. Where the various stages that follow environmental contact are characterized by declining awareness and deliberation such that integration can take place, egotism reasserts deliberation and intellectualizing, which inhibits the assimilation of the contact episode and overall growth. *Deflecting* involves reducing the emotional weight of a situation through shifting away from the figure at hand. Laughing, making a joke, proffering intellectualized explanations, or breaking eye contact without awareness when consistently encountering intensely emotional situations would all be examples of deflecting.

For Gestalt therapists, when creative adjustments become rigidified and contact boundary phenomena are used without awareness and fail to fully satisfy personal needs, therapy involves heightening a client’s awareness to the manner in which they identify needs and/or contact the environment to attend to figures of interest. Then, Gestalt therapists and their clients engage in *experiments*, one of the primary interventions in
Gestalt therapy. Experiments are creative interventions that serve to increase individuals’ awareness about their experience and allow them to practice different ways of acting or responding to situations. In essence, experimentation in therapy attempts to reinfuse novelty and spontaneity into the capacity of individuals to creatively adjust and respond to their situations through experientially revealing how much freedom and responsability individuals have in managing their lives.

Creative adjustments are the central component to organismic self-regulation. As Perls and Goodman conceptualized self as the system of contacts necessary in navigating the environment, and that “all contact is creative adjustment” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 230), organismic self-regulation is also a vital aspect to the Gestalt therapy theory of self. However, the presentation of organismic self-regulation, especially through the discussions and demonstrations by Perls in the 1960s and 1970s, has contributed to a belief that Gestalt therapy is an orientation dedicated to perpetuating immediate gratification at the expense of others’ needs and a general hedonistic attitude (e.g., Prochaska & Norcross, 2002). Such a perspective would have significant implications for how appropriate Gestalt therapy, with such a grounding principle, would be for individuals who identify with a different set of values and have a different conceptualization of self.
THEORETICAL EXAMINATION OF ORGANISMIC SELF-REGULATION
CONSIDERING ETHNICALLY DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES OF SELFHOOD AND RELATEDNESS

Universal Principle or Culturally-Bound Imposition?

The premise underlying the principle of organismic self-regulation within Gestalt therapy theory is that it illustrates a natural process, shared by all humans by virtue of having a human body-mind system that is structured and has been developed to maintain a level of balance both within the individual and in interaction with the environment. Perls’ (1947/1969a) initial presentation of the concept appeared to be self-evident, a quality shared not only by humans but also by any organism in an environment. His approach to understanding human psychology was embodied, namely that the Cartesian dualism of a “mind” inhabiting a distinct “body” that interacted in a separate “world” was an inaccurate model for characterizing how humans live and experience. Instead, the human individual was a unity, a holistic process, which fluctuated and flowed as a component of the field (Perls, 1973; Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951). Thus, if the life sciences could assert empirical legitimacy to how organisms, from large mammals to microscopic creatures, engaged their environments in the “biological economics” of “breaking even” (i.e., homeostasis), then maybe this could reflect an analogous process in psychology, where ‘breaking even’ meant experiencing a theoretical moment when a given need had been satisfied and a new need had yet emerged.
Perls et al. (1951) elaborated more on Perls’ early presentation of many concepts in Gestalt therapy, including organicist self-regulation. According to them, organicist self-regulation was the psychological form of the “spontaneous consciousness of the dominant need and its organization of the functions of contact” (p. 274). This principle would be intimately tied with Gestalt notions of both models of figure formation and destruction (i.e., Gestalt Therapy’s contact sequence and the Cleveland model of the cycle of experience) and creative adjustments, as discussed previously. Perls and Goodman acknowledged early on that the psychological importation of self-regulation was something that currently many therapists incorporated in practice, but that the novelty of a more “total self-regulation, of all the functions of the soul” (p. 247) was something still unaccepted in the psychotherapy of their times. They pointed to the idea that the remnants of the Freudian ‘reality principle’ dampened the fullness of organicist self-regulation outside of Gestalt therapy work, especially as this reality principle had been introjected as a body of social laws given scientific legitimacy through the work and influence of empirical behaviorism (Wheeler, 2008), an ironic state of affairs considering that the respective proponents of Freudian psychoanalysis and American behaviorism were opposed to and highly critical of each other (Wheeler, 2005).

Likely due to the combination of his migration across the United States to lecture and train others in Gestalt therapy and his flair for highly impactful training demonstrations that tended toward the theatrical, Perls quickly became the visible spokesperson for Gestalt therapy in American popular culture in the 1960s (Bowman, 2005). With the rise of the human potential movement and the sociopolitical counterculture, Gestalt therapy, especially as demonstrated by Perls, became associated

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with the general zeitgeist of the decade, linked with communalism, freedom, and consciousness expansion. As Perls was not so focused on teaching the underlying theory of Gestalt therapy as he was with active demonstration of techniques, some students of Gestalt therapy took to an incomplete understanding of the whole of the approach. This resulted in individuals who regarded and practiced Gestalt therapy as either a system of catchy slogans and decontextualized techniques or a system of concrete, episodic concepts without any sense of continuity over time (Yontef, 1993). In either case, the wholeness of the driving theory of Gestalt therapy was lost, leading to misinterpretations about concepts that Perls would discuss in training workshops or in print.

In this historical context, the principle of organismic self-regulation would be infused with a whole host of meanings and connotations resonant with the zeitgeist of the United States in the 1960s. This became highly apparent with Perls’ “direction” in navigating life in the form of what he referred to as the “Gestalt prayer”:

I do my thing, and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I,
And if by chance we find each other, it’s beautiful.
If not, it can’t be helped. (Perls, 1969b, p. 4)

Without a fuller understanding of Gestalt therapy theory, many people understood this simple “prayer” to espouse a principle of self-regulation that emphasized stark individualism and personal hedonism as the basis of health for people (e.g., Prochaska & Norcross, 2002). Such an image was highly criticized by others in the psychological community, likening healthy individuals (by Gestalt therapists’ apparent standards) to “self-serving ‘misfits’” and “people who… are like children in demanding instant
gratification, but are unlike children in refusing to learn from their experience” (Crocker, 1983, p. 4).

In addition to the undesirable consequences of a hypothetical American society that consisted of a number of such hedonistic miscreants, such a perspective of organismic self-regulation also had poor implications for the adaptability of this psychotherapeutic approach for individuals from cultures whose values and worldview was much more collectivistic in orientation than American culture. If the extreme individualism of organismic self-regulation, which seemed to be central to this interpretation of Gestalt therapy, was incompatible with the individualism of the United States, than how much more inappropriate would it be with people raised in the collectivism of non-Western cultures? Frew (2008) regarded this as a significant blind spot for Gestalt therapy in conceptualizing and treating culturally diverse individuals.

Although Gestalt therapists have increasingly added to the literature regarding their orientation and attending to cultural differences (e.g., Bar-Yoseph, 2005; Clemmens & Bursztyn, 2003; Fernbacher, 2005; Wheeler, 2005), Frew’s (2008) concern about the “tacit belief” within Gestalt therapy that organismic self-regulation is based upon individuals addressing their needs “first and foremost” (p. 267) has not been explicitly addressed. Indeed, if organismic self-regulation is truly founded upon the premise that healthy functioning primarily involves meeting individual needs, then collectivist values, such as individual deference to group needs and goals, may be conceptualized as inhibiting proper self-regulation and representing pathology. The negative consequences of mistaking this principle as universal when it is culturally-bound, pathologizing culturally different values, and basing treatment on the replacement of pathological (i.e.,
non-Western) values and behaviors with healthy (i.e., Western) values and behaviors are what Sue has referred to as monocultural ethnocentrism (Sue, 2004; Sue & Sue, 2008).

A full analysis of this state of affairs requires examination of a number of interrelated questions. First, how is organismic self-regulation to be understood? That is, is organismic self-regulation truly based upon individuals satisfying personal needs first without any apparent or initial regard for others’ needs? Or, is this a misinterpretation of what organismic self-regulation really is? Second, is organismic self-regulation truly a universal process common to all humans, regardless of ethnicity or culture? Finally, does the term organismic self-regulation itself need to be changed to reflect what the principle truly denotes, in light of whether it is universal or culture-bound? Exploration of these questions follows.

The Structure of Organismic Self-Regulation

It seems apparent that humans regulate themselves in dealing with acknowledged needs, desires, and stressors. The uncertainty in an examination of self-regulation is the form it takes and how individuals understand the notion of “self” in the process of such regulation. The general process of organismic self-regulation in Gestalt therapy has been introduced in an earlier section, as well as in brief presentations of selfhood in various cultural groups and within Gestalt therapy theory. The following examination will more deeply deconstruct the principle of organismic self-regulation and how the principle relates to the respective viewpoints of self and relatedness among culturally diverse groups, especially those cultures characterized as collectivist.
The starting point for Gestalt therapists in discussing organismic self-regulation is with the individual person. Some Gestalt therapy theorists focus on the individual as a separate being, a “free center of valuing, desiring, choosing, and doing” (Crocker, 1983, pp. 5-6), a conceptualization that resonates profoundly with Gestalt therapy’s existentialist heritage. Other Gestalt therapy theorists (e.g., Wheeler, 2005) emphasize the individual as already enculturated from birth (and before birth, in the case of more transpersonal literature; e.g., Bowman & Leakey, 2006; Williams, 2006), understood as being of the larger field, which is more directly tied into a radical extension of field theory. These respective positions are not inherently opposed to each other, but rather reflect the dialectic of human existence. However, contradictions from the two perspectives do contribute to confusion and some level of conceptual inconsistency, especially considering that field theory and dialogic existentialism are touted as two of the three philosophical foundations of Gestalt therapy.

Taken to their extreme positions, the existentialist emphasis found in Gestalt therapy theory localized focus upon the individual without the adornments of “external” proscriptions or restrictions, tracing back to the experiential “essence” of the individual, while the radical field theory position maintained how the individual self is a complex construction, an immense abstraction, within the ebb and flow of the field. In other words, there is only an experiential being for the existentialist position, while there is only the field for the radical field theory position. An existentialist critique of the radical field theory position would be how it ignores or denies a sense of consistent structure that provides individual agency (or, at least, the experience of individual agency), challenging
the notion of individual intentionality. A radical field theory critique of the existentialist emphasis would be how it ultimately ignores or denies the importance of interdependence on a deep level, pathologizing culture (for instance) as something inhibiting or adversely impacting the expression of the individual.

As noted, such positions are the extreme poles, with no clear evidence that any Gestalt therapists actually maintain one or the other position to its extreme. Indeed, a part of Gestalt therapy’s theoretical basis, especially regarding a new understanding of self, involved a complex combination of self-as-process and self-as-structure, such that self was understood as something that makes contact with other things and also emerges from that contact (Perls et al., 1951). At the same time, discussions about theoretical consistency, especially in implementing the philosophical foundations in methodology and practice, have become increasingly common, both in printed works (e.g., Wheeler, 2005, 2006) and among online forums and electronic mail lists (e.g., Bloom, 2009; Brownell, 2009a, 2009b). The precision of what is being espoused in the theory of Gestalt therapy is paramount to fully understanding what is being described by the principle of organismic self-regulation and how it functions beneficially.

The primary tension between the existentialist and radical field theory emphases involves how self is understood in regards to regulation and how dialogue – held by proponents of both views as vital to regulation and growth – is conceived and used. A corollary to this tension is the manner in which field theory is understood and used in the service of therapeutic practice. Thus, an examination of each emphasis and what their proponents assert follows.
Existentialist emphasis.

Existentialist philosophers have long been criticized for denigrating interpersonal relationships and larger social aspects, judging them to be detrimental to the development and actualization of the individual person. From a quick, superficial reading, there is much to support this negative outlook on relatedness, whether it is the attribution of hell to interactions with others (Sartre, 1946/1989) or how culture hides a deeper sense of being and numbs vitality (Heidegger, 1927/1962). The aforementioned Gestalt prayer seemed to continue this existentialist/individualist perspective, but placed in the domain of healthy psychological functioning. From the extreme form of this existentialist emphasis, it appeared that at the start of existence there is only an isolated, independent self who drifts further and further away from his/her deep ontic character as enculturation, socialization, and unevaluated activity make up more and more of his/her life. Thus, for a theoretical orientation to psychology that promotes a self-in-relation viewpoint and whose proponents describe their work as relational, it would seem that an existentialist implementation is either an introjected quality or an ignored anomaly.

This paradox has a resolution in that a deeper, fuller reading of existentialism brought about a very different idea compared to its reputation for being anti-relationship. The assertion of existential philosophers was not the avoidance of relationships and the disposal of society and culture, but the acceptance of relationships as a given to existence and a critical examination of socio-cultural elements with regards to one’s experience (Earnshaw, 2006). Experience was vital to existence, including how socio-cultural values and worldviews were understood and expressed, and that all experience involved consideration of being with other people. From this perspective, Gestalt therapists were
not trying to fit the square peg of existentialism into the round hole of psychological/psychotherapeutic theory, but re-conceptualized the role of awareness, contact, and experience in how people relate to each other and manage the world.

Revisiting the Gestalt prayer as the poetic means of understanding organismic self-regulation, Crocker (1983) analyzed it, discerning what is actually being expressed in its verses and how its more radical individualist interpretation is “foolishness.” The centerpiece of Crocker’s argument was that the proponents and adherents to the self-serving perspective were unfamiliar with the interpersonal consequences of Gestalt therapy theory that would give important context to the words of the ‘prayer’ in accurately reflecting the Gestalt therapeutic approach. One of the first assertions Crocker made was that organismic self-regulation was “not impaled upon the here-and-now, nor does it view the human person as a strictly lone agent” (p. 5). Thus, the view that the Gestalt prayer – and organismic self-regulation by extension – reflected a value among Gestalt therapists that healthy individuals are those who immediately gratify personal needs at whatever the cost is a harmful misrepresentation of the approach.

Although Perls is often saddled with criticism for contributing to an inaccurate view of Gestalt therapy held by the larger psychological community and popular culture, Crocker (1983) noted Perls’ explicit concern about the shift of American culture from an environment of introjective puritanism to unbridled hedonism. Specifically, Perls (1973) characterized the latter situation as a phobia of any and all suffering, which actually inhibits organismic growth rather than facilitates it. Furthermore, as Perls et al. (1951) established a theory where self is built upon contact between individuals, the belief that organismic self-regulation is a wholly individualized process is questioned.
In addition to reintroducing Perls’ own warnings and positions to challenge the belief that the Gestalt prayer is a license for immediate and selfish satisfaction of desires, Crocker (1983) clarified that Gestalt therapy theory acknowledged the temporality of the individual and the impact of this characteristic in working in the here-and-now. The here-and-now focus in Gestalt therapy was not an emphasis of an isolated moment without any ties to past or future, a critiqued perspective resulting from a lack of familiarity with Gestalt therapy theory (see Yontef, 1993), but rather a statement about the temporal context for individual action. Remembrance of the past or anticipation of the future can only take place in the present moment, as well as considering time in decisions or actions (e.g., gratification of short-term needs or sacrificing short-term satisfaction for longer-term needs).

The present moment is also the temporal setting for the twofold awareness required for healthy, free-flowing psychological functioning: “the individual’s awareness of his own needs and desires, and environmental awareness of opportunities and obstacles to satisfaction… which are actually and potentially available to him” (Crocker, 1983, p. 8). As noted explicitly in both the contact sequence and the cycle of experience, awareness of personal needs is only half of the equation regarding figure completion. The second phase (“contacting”) of the contact sequence and the excitement/scanning phase of the cycle of experience both involve active awareness and discernment of the environment that is associated with general ego functioning – “this is for me or can be used by me” or “this is not for me or cannot be used by me” – in attending to an identified figure. On the surface, this environmental awareness does appear to be very task-oriented, seeking objects in the environment that may serve the individual in figure
completion. For truly inanimate objects, a task-based perspective in gratifying needs may not be problematic. However, viewing other individuals in this way when the figure is interpersonal in nature may seem to reduce people to useful (or useless) objects. It is with this danger that Gestalt therapy theorists returned to existentialism to address potential dehumanization.

One example of the existentialist solution to the problem of viewing people as merely environmental objects is the presentation of Heidegger’s (Cerbone, 2008; Heidegger, 1927/1962) related concepts of “being-with-others” (Mitsein) and the unique “caring-for-others” (Fürsorge) that is inherent in interpersonal relations. The basis of these concepts is the fact that humans naturally enter into relationships with each other. Whether the frame of the interaction is practically-oriented or focused on the sharing of humanity, there is a specific sense of care given to human relationships that is characteristically different from any sense of care or concern with inanimate objects.

Another related existentialist solution, which is most discussed among Gestalt therapists, is the dialogic existentialism of Buber (1923/1970). Buber acknowledged the fluctuation of different modes of relating, the task-based I-It and the humanity-focused I-Thou. Although the I-It mode, where other people are regarded more in how they can serve an individual in achieving a goal, is not considered as essentially bad or evil, regarding other people solely this way not only denies the humanity of the other, but also denies the humanity of the individual (Jacobs, 1989).

With these two lines of existentialist thought, an individual’s sense of concern or care for others parallels the deepest existential being common to both (Heidegger, 1927/1962) and such human connections are symmetrical in expression since that deeper
humanity shared by both parties is mutually subjective in much the same way (Buber, 1923/1970). Thus, from the Heidegger-Buber line of thought, an individual naturally in the I-Thou mode of relating with another is fully equal, in a deeply experiential way, with the other person because of a felt identification with the other based on one’s awareness of personal being. In other words, the individual can “know” the other through one’s own experience of deep subjective identity, this sharing of knowledge being dialogue.

More recent discussions from Gestalt therapists about phenomenology and dialogic existentialism have explored the philosophical territory of other thinkers, most notably the work of Levinas (1969, 1999). To date, very little has been printed and published on Levinas and his relation to Gestalt therapy theory, instead such discussions have been relegated to online forums and electronic mail lists (e.g., Bloom, 2009; Brownell, 2009a, 2009b). However, the interest in the work of Levinas has been due to his philosophical elaboration on Heidegger and his alternative viewpoint on interrelations compared to the perspective put forth by Buber.

Levinas challenged both respective positions proposed by Heidegger and Buber. Regarding Heidegger, Levinas (1969) disagreed with the thought that ontological being simultaneously means humanly caring. Instead, he proposed subjectivity is based from and expressed through interactions and relationships with others. That is, where Heidegger asserted that ontology and ethics were parallel domains, Levinas proposed that ontology emerges from ethics, that humans begin from obligation to others and philosophical knowledge comes later.

In contrasting Buber’s presentation, Levinas (1969, 1999) maintained that the interhuman mode of relating to others – which as intimated previously is the domain of
ethics for Levinas – is inherently asymmetrical. Throughout his work, Levinas noted how an individual is immediately placed in a lower priority in a relationship when presented with the other, such that a sense of a “demand” is placed upon the self in acknowledging the other before any specific personal judgment or reaction is brought into awareness or acted upon. In other words, the individual’s deeply-held sense of freedom is restricted immediately and profoundly by the appearance of the other, which indicates an ethical obligation to the other. For Levinas, this description of alterity, both in regards to Heidegger and Buber, is exemplified in his notion of “face.”

The face-to-face interaction is what fully reveals the sense of alterity. In the experience of the other, by looking upon the face of the other, an individual deeply feels the privileged position of the other in relation to him/herself, as well as how utterly different the other is. Levinas’ (1969) concept of the face of the other is simultaneously gentle and resisting. It is gentle in the fact that the face is completely given in experience to the self as bare and defenseless. At the same time, it is resisting or restrictive in that the face implicitly asserts its initial demand of not being killed or destroyed by the self. This demand of the face of the other appears before any sense of freedom by the self, thus, restricting the self’s activity through calling for the self’s obligation in serving the other. The self-other (face-to-face) interaction experientially emphasizes both the proximity (i.e., the mutuality of ethical responsibility and the ethical foundation of intersubjectivity) and the distance (i.e., how the other can never be absolutely known through subjectivity) of the parties. The role of face and alterity defines Levinas’ idea of ethics, whereas morality then is an attempt to generalize ethics across larger numbers of people (e.g., cultures) beyond what might be immediately felt in the context of face-to-face contact.
The ramifications of Levinas’ (1969, 1999) alterity, especially regarding Gestalt therapy theory and practice, is that the individual, who is inherently understood as always being in relation to another, is bound to an ethical duty to the other. An acceptance of Levinas’ proposition of ‘ethics as first philosophy’ places individual existence and subjective experience completely in terms of interhuman activity, in the immediate meeting of people face-to-face. From this standpoint, organismic self-regulation when involving interpersonal activity always starts with the other, on a deep and existential level, before the needs and actions of the self, presumably common to all humanity. Other human components (e.g., culture, morals, laws), whether introjected or assimilated, further shape, facilitate, or inhibit this interaction with an unknowable other, all initially based from face-to-face interactions. Dialogic relationships are not felt as equal by the individual-in-contact, as might be interpreted from Buber’s descriptions of I-Thou, but rather are experienced as unequal by the individual. The other is experienced as paradoxically both transcendent (existing beyond the self) and immanent (existing intersubjectively).

Although existentialist self-regulation begins with the individual, all existentialist lines of thought acknowledge or emphasize how the individual is always in contact with other people. Gestalt therapists who concentrate on the existentialist aspects of theory note how the individual is an active agent, navigating interpersonal relations through intentional action. Whether the individual conceptualizes the other as a means to complete an objective (Buber’s I-It relationship) or thematizes the other in order to attempt to fully know the other (as noted by Levinas), the existential proximity between self and other is ignored or denied. Yet, it is the quality of surrendering to the
relationship, whether it is the sharing of intrinsic humanity (Buber’s I-Thou relationship) or being with the transcendence-immanence of the other (as noted by Levinas), that facilitates a free-flowing sense of self-regulation in interpersonal contact. Further, each of these moments or experiences of contact is assimilated, providing an ever-developing ground for future experiences, which eliminates the notion of organismic self-regulation as being completely tied to a discrete and decontextualized present moment.

Radical field theory emphasis.

Gestalt therapy theorists who focus more with a “radical field theory” perspective (see Brownell, 2009b) are able to address the manner in which organismic self-regulation as presented in the Gestalt prayer is understood in a different way than the existentialist perspective. These proponents continue to extend the ontological implications of field theory, as discussed in a previous section, which refines selfhood and relatedness as they are understood in relation to the field. The radical quality of these field theorists comes from their conceptualization that ultimately it is a field that regulates, since individuals are constructed aspects of the field, but not distinct from the field in any substantial or meaningful way (e.g., Wheeler, 1991, 2005).

The aforementioned discussion of the field in Gestalt therapy took two main and interrelated thrusts: the definition of a field and the consequences of specific field theoretical approaches. Both aspects of field theory in Gestalt therapy literature are complicated by the confusion of what is meant by both “field” and “field theory.” For instance, Staemmler (2006) thoroughly examined this confusion by noting the discrepancy and categorical difficulties in how “field” is used generally and especially by
Gestalt therapists. In his work, Staemmler identified how the field as presented by Lewin (1948/1997) was a phenomenal field, primarily conceptualized as an epistemological tool, while Perls et al. (1951) developed the same concept as a unitary field, one that combines the psychological/phenomenal and the physical.

One of the potential origins of a radical field theory approach in Gestalt therapy could be found in the work of Latner (1983) in his differentiation between Newtonian, system-based theories and quantum, field-based theories. Latner distinguished between these types of theories in general and then how they appear more specifically in the theoretical writings of Gestalt therapists. For instance, he described how much of psychology before the emergence of Gestalt therapy was mechanistically- and systemically-oriented, established in the perspective that the world was made up of discrete entities (people as “billiard balls”) who occasionally collided with each other, and that was how behavior and selfhood was understood. Then, Perls writing in *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (1947/1969a) seemed to “have one leg on either side of this particular fence [i.e., system theory versus field theory]” (Latner, 1983, p. 77), contributing to initial confusion about how he reconciled reality and experience. When Perls et al. presented *Gestalt Therapy* (1951), Latner maintained that a full sense of a field theory without any Newtonian linearity was achieved. However, according to Latner, later works by other Gestalt therapists, such as Polster and Polster (1973), brought back the confusion of discussing field theory yet relying upon system-based language and concepts. Latner concluded the need for theoretical clarity in concepts and perspectives regarding field theory, possibly relying upon assistance from the findings in modern
physics as an inspiration in how to achieve such conceptual clarity and promote practical implementation.

Embedded in Latner’s (1983) discussion was the idea that field theory rests upon the existence of a homogeneous (or, in Latner’s words, “undulating”) field and that promotion of boundaries (especially the ‘I-boundaries’ noted in Polster & Polster, 1973) are abstractions since all activity is of the field. Latner illustrated how boundaries seem to contradict a field theoretical approach by emphasizing how the concept of a boundary is one of distinction and separation, likening it to the ‘billiard ball universe’ of Newtonian physics. For Latner, experiential achievement of the undulating field is the ultimate gestalt (see Latner, 1973) and leads to a healthy sense of confluence. Insistence on boundaries suggested “a fear of healthy confluence” (Latner, 1983, p. 87) and was characterized by Latner as neurotic.

Less than a decade later, Wheeler (1991) put forth a work that resonated with many of the ideas Latner (1983) had explored. Wheeler also argued against a reductionist and mechanical view of experience and elucidated lingering elements of such a perspective in Gestalt therapy theory. Paralleling some of Latner’s thinking, Wheeler couched his argument of reassessing the appropriateness of the idea of “resistances” in Gestalt therapy in terms of the field or, to use Wheeler’s words, “the structured ground.” Wheeler’s emphasis on the “structured ground” (or the “structures of the ground”) consistently appear to be the foundational premises in much of his later work (e.g., 2000, 2005, 2006). In short, Wheeler argued that the standard perspective put forth by Perls et al. (1951) was excessively figure-bound, that their theory was “impulse-ridden” and mired in the “isolated moment” (Wheeler, 1991, p. 65). He countered with advocating
attention in understanding the structures of the ground from which figures emerge, shifting focus from individualized needs (figures) to the larger socio-cultural contexts of people (structured ground).

Key to the proponents of a more radical field theory approach is how self is understood, which Wheeler succinctly defined in that the self is “a function of the field” and the “constructivist process itself” (Wheeler, 2006, p. 14). Thus, it would be misleading to attribute behavioral regulation to a self (as taken to be synonymous with an individual), as it is actually the field that regulates. The concept of bounded, distinct individuals who interact with one another is held to be an inaccurate description of interhuman dynamics (much like how Latner compares such a perspective to Newtonian billiard ball thinking), instead relationships are based upon the deep interconnection (or confluence) in the structured ground; individualism is a constructed abstraction (Wheeler, 2000, 2005). For radical field theorists, previous reliance on establishing isolated individuality as the key to health was a denial of the inherent inseparability of humanity, leading to the pathologizing of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that sought to develop or maintain interpenetrating relationships by labeling them as “enmeshment,” “confluence,” or “dependence” (for more on de-pathologizing dependence, see Weiss, 2002).

From the radical field theory position, self-regulation is not achieved through examination of personalized needs in a given context, but rather on exploration of the context itself. Illumination of the “structured ground” of people is necessary to understand the worldview and perspective of all involved in a given situation. For Wheeler (2005), the exploration of contact must be traced back from a particular figure to the ground from which it emerged, to get at what constructions gave rise to the particular
figure and how self is formed. In this light, dialogue was recast as a specific conversation, aimed at deep understanding of the meaning and values of others which characterize the field in interhuman relationships (Wheeler, 2000). In other words, dialogue is the means to overtly reveal the structured ground. In this way, Wheeler noted how such a new paradigm of self and relatedness not only has ramifications for psychology and psychotherapy, but also impacting other domains, such as economics, politics, and culture (Wheeler, 2006).

*Organismic Self-Regulation Understood*

The inconsistencies noted in contrasting the two lines of thought regarding self and dialogue – existentialism and radical field theory – appear to be incongruent in so much as proponents of each lineage address different concerns and how the general notion of a field is understood. Although ontology is a fundamental component to much of existentialism, many Gestalt therapists have imported existentialism through phenomenology to attend to therapeutic issues rather than philosophical questions (e.g., Crocker, 2005). Further, such Gestalt therapists appear to generally take a stance of understanding field theory as an epistemology and have adapted it in ways appropriate for the clinical setting (e.g., Yontef, 1993). Meanwhile, radical field theorists have attempted to distance their theoretical understanding away from a paradigm of linearity and isolated entities toward a more inclusive paradigm of complexity and interpenetrating fluctuations of a larger field. For these theorists, such a perspective has more immediacy in navigating larger social units (e.g., communities, societies, cultures) and the interactions among those units (e.g., Wheeler, 2000). Field theory, then, nears the status
of an ontology (e.g., O’Neill, 2008), whereby the field is a reality – maybe the only reality – in a world where most all other things are constructions and abstractions from an undifferentiated ground (e.g., Wheeler, 2005).

The conceptual confusion between these emphases of thought is impacted by interpretations of what the founders of Gestalt therapy conceived of as a field. Perls et al. (1951) asserted the idea of a “unified field” and illustrated this idea with the linking of the biological and the psychological domains. However, as authors such as Staemmler (2006) have discussed, the idea of a unified field is muddled in how it is understood and how it is connected with or derived from other theoretical elements of Gestalt therapy, such as the isomorphism of Gestalt psychology, the holism of Smuts, and the Lewinian concept of field (Bowman, 2005). For instance, Lewin’s (1948/1997) idea of the field described a phenomenal field (“life space”) consisting of a person and his/her environment. The importation of this idea of field into Gestalt therapy changed from the phenomenal concept (person/environment field) found in Lewin’s writings to a transphenomenal model (organism/environment field) found in Perls’ literature, beginning with a strong biological emphasis (Perls, 1947/1969a) and leading to the unification of the biological with the social and psychological (Perls et al., 1951).

This confusion regarding the field extended to the conceptualization of the role of the boundary (or, more specifically, the contact boundary), which is an important element in understanding the process of organismic self-regulation. Perls and Goodman, based on the premise of a unified field, made explicit the connection between the physical organism and phenomenal experience when they located experience “at the boundary between the organism and the environment, primarily at the skin surface and the other
organs of the sensory and motor response” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 227). To add more confusion to the situation, Perls et al. also characterized the contact boundary as the “organ of awareness” (p. 259). Despite the attempt to create a unified theory of a field, the imagery used by early Gestalt therapy theorists seemed to favor the biological (transphenomenal) level in the development of the theory, implicitly equating it monistically to the psychological (phenomenal). Although a number of contemporary Gestalt therapy commentators have discussed the philosophical and practical difficulties in blithely implementing shared terms among highly different domains of study, Staemmler (2006) has been the most articulate in identifying how the linguistic blurring of the physical-biological-organismic with the personal-psychological-phenomenal contributes to ongoing conceptual inconsistency and methodological problems, known in philosophical circles as a “category mistake” (see Ryle, 1949).

In his critique and revision of Gestalt therapy theory, Wheeler (1991) provided one of first explicit challenges to Perls and Goodman in their way of unifying the organismic and the personal when he acknowledged that experience is synthesized in a “place difficult to specify, but at any rate quite far from my ‘sensitive skin’” (p. 59). However, Wheeler still maintained a more unified position of field, attempting to correct the Perlsian confusion of a unified field by minimizing the traditional use of the boundary-oriented terminology, such as resistance, and emphasizing the underlying elements of the field. Thus, for Wheeler and other proponents of a radical field theory perspective, the field gives rise to organisms and environments, furthering the notion that the latter elements are abstractions of the field.
Ironically, the assertion of a unified field, either as how it was presented by Perls and Goodman or by radical field theorists, does the opposite of its intention, namely instead of expanding the view of universal interactions and challenging a linearly-based perspective, it reduces the field to a nonlinear homogeneity (Bernhardtson, 2008; Yontef, 1993). In challenging the Newtonian, mechanistic worldview, the radical field theorists have overemphasized the oneness of nature. However, in excising linearity from their perspective, radical field theorists are at a loss to explain and account for natural differentiation, paradoxically reducing everything to a single, all-encompassing figure (e.g., Latner, 1973) or a figureless ground (e.g., Wheeler, 1991). Proponents who use either of these concepts attempted to straddle dualistic language but established confusing and meaningless ideas, since figures and grounds – as they are conceived of both within Gestalt psychology and Gestalt therapy – necessitate each other and that one cannot be simply be reduced to the other.

It is further interesting to note how different Gestalt therapists understand the idea of a unified field, as the term is not solely the domain of radical field theorists. For instance, Parlett (1997, 2005) understands the unified field as a metaphor for the nonlinear dynamics of reality. He acknowledged the epistemological frame that Lewin had about the field, but was open to the possibilities that scientific advancement and technological development could have on shaping field theory in a more ontological explanation. Apart from the radical field theorists’ conception of the unified field, most other Gestalt therapists appear to understand the unified field in much a similar way to Parlett, even if they reject the term itself and maintain the idea (e.g., Francis, 2005; Yontef, 1993).
Critics of the radical field theory position do admire how its proponents illuminate the important dynamics of culture in regards to the concept of the field and organismic self-regulation, but question the theoretical and philosophical positions outlined by radical field theorists in achieving their perspective (e.g., Yontef, 1992). For these critics of radical field theory, such a radical position is fraught with misinterpretation of Gestalt therapy theory already in place and unnecessary implementation of alternative concepts, which tend to be unclear, to account for assumed gaps in Gestalt therapy theory. Specifically, such critics fault the presumption of radical field theorists that Gestalt therapy theory had been originally created and continued to develop within a strict individualist paradigm until the proliferation of the radical field position (e.g., Wymore, 2009). Thus, a difficulty arises in how it is individuals self-regulate, when agency is attributed as a characteristic not of those individuals but of the field. Yet for radical field theorists, their version of dialogue as the means to facilitate regulation of the field by moving from figure to ground implicitly assumes some level of admitting to an individual self and such a self can examine the structured ground of which individuals are a part.

From the various writings and commentaries on Gestalt therapy self theory and organismic self-regulation, the recurrent theme presented is how a lack of understanding or full appreciation of the larger Gestalt therapy theory has contributed to a misrepresentation of the implicit role of self and relatedness, especially in light of organismic self-regulation, in the Gestalt clinical approach. Organismic self-regulation as reinforcing a strict individualist (i.e., counterdependent) proscription for attending to needs, through immediate gratification of any and all desires without consideration of others is consistently challenged throughout the Gestalt literature. Instead, the self and
self-regulation impinge upon acknowledgment of others and relating to them in the most interpersonally appropriate ways available given field conditions. Further, re-emphasis of the temporal aspects of experience, including the basic notion of differentiating between short-term gratification and long-term satisfaction and how the focus of the present moment is not a denial of past events or future consequences, but is the experiential context for behavioral activity, has been considered vitally important to the understanding of selfhood and self-regulation.

The Universality of Organismic Self-Regulation

As hinted earlier, self-regulation, considered in the broadest terms, is a universal process. All people seem to have the capacity to cope with satisfying needs and desires, whether it is to address hunger or secure intimacy. Much of the actual form of such regulation or what aspects are considered or prioritized in the process are guided by cultural values and presumptions about the natural world. The primary concern about organismic self-regulation as the foundational principle of Gestalt therapy involved whether that specific process was shared by all humans regardless of cultural differences or if this seemingly universal process was more accurately a model of regulation derived from the worldview of European cultures. The main cause for critical examination of this state of affairs resided in understanding organismic self-regulation as emphasizing values more consistent with individualist cultures, which may not properly account for how those in collectivist cultures respond to needs and wants and, thus, regard culturally diverse forms of regulation as pathology.
As mentioned in previous sections, part of the questioning of organismic self-regulation came from confusion about how “self” is defined and understood, especially regarding relationships. Within the social sciences, researchers have conceptualized various cultures as either encompassing or emphasizing different modes of how self and relatedness are enacted, namely individualism and collectivism. Using these labels, selfhood is delineated, with the individualist self tending toward personalized descriptions and independent agency and goals, and the collectivist self tending toward descriptions tied to social roles and group-based agency and goals. The danger lays in the possibility that Gestalt therapy theorists could assert as ultimate and universal ideas of selfhood, and subsequently mental health and illness, which are actually only descriptive of Western cultures.

Gestalt therapy theorists have incorporated a variety of elements from Western philosophy, including embedded individualist values in those elements. At the same time, those same theorists looked to new theoretical perspectives coming out of Europe (e.g., Gestalt experimental psychology) and assimilated philosophical viewpoints from outside of Europe, both of which contained more collectivist-oriented values. In developing their psychotherapeutic approach, Gestalt therapists challenged the implicit individualist paradigm of the Western world (e.g., Perls et al., 1951) and asserted that the traditional individualist-collectivist viewpoints in the social sciences were a false dualism in social interactions (e.g., Wymore, 2009). This became exemplified in the Gestalt therapy theory of self, where self was understood as emergent from interpersonal contact, as discussed previously. The emphasis here was placed upon direct experience rather than passive acceptance of proscriptions. However, proscriptions and shared values were not
denigrated, but rather were to be critically examined and checked with personal values when dealing with lived experience.

It is clear that the existentialist heritage of Gestalt therapy plays an important role in shaping how both self-regulation and culture are understood. Although the superficial interpretation of existentialism, and Gestalt therapy by extension, as equating culture with inhibiting being and selfhood is a misrepresentation (e.g., Polster, 1998), there does appear to be a value within Gestalt therapy that individuals are capable of regarding or disregarding aspects of their culture to suit a specific field context and that development of such a capacity as a spontaneous or free-flowing activity is an ideal goal for individuals to achieve (e.g., Latner, 1973; Perls, 1969b). The first step in cultivating this capacity involves the heightening of awareness about one’s experience and exploration of the structures of self, especially introjected elements that typically reside outside of conscious awareness in everyday living, something that is not generally done in any culture.

The directly experiential aspect of culture is the presumption that one’s worldview is “the way things are” in that it never is questioned, and is only defined and considered in the face of other people’s alternative worldviews. Another aspect of culture is that different cultural groups have varying levels of tolerance in individual questioning and modulation of group-based values and behaviors. All cultures have some limitations in what behaviors and values are allowed, exemplified in social norms or established laws, but the rigidity of those limitations differs among each group. Sometimes the tolerance can be generalized to broad cultural labels. For example, a predominantly collectivist culture might judge an individualist value (e.g., pursuit of a personal goal
over and above pursuit of a group-based obligation) to be too threatening to be allowed. Likewise, a predominantly individualist culture might deem the converse collectivist value (e.g., deference of a personal goal to a group goal) to be detrimental to cultural norms.

The critical consideration of cultural values, norms, and proscriptions regarding individual experience and behavior is something most often analyzed in the frame of psychotherapy, which has been more of a part of Western cultures than other cultural groups. In American culture, as an example, navigating one’s behavior to either appropriately coincide or adaptively conflict with larger American norms is something more readily examined, if not enacted, in part due to the influence of psychology in the cultural consciousness of the United States. Thus, for cultural groups where psychology, especially as it is understood and practiced in the West, is a relatively new domain, the implicit values carried over in American culture from psychology might significantly conflict with other cultures’ values and worldview.

The presumption of Gestalt therapists in promoting organismic self-regulation as a universal concept may be inaccurate. Where some Western cultures might allow for the personal deconstruction of cultural components in understanding individual behavior, values, and expectations, other cultures – or, in some contexts, Western cultures, too – may assert reluctance to doing such destructuring of cultural norms. Specifically, the allowance of an individual to decide whether or not to abide by cultural values or to create his/her own values tends to be more acceptable in some individualist cultures (e.g., American culture), where the individual is emphasized more, than in many collectivist
cultures, where the individual is typically regarded with his/her social role to the larger group.

Gestalt therapists do challenge a strict individualist perspective within their theoretical approach, most notably with its theory of self as a self-in-contact. Their existentialist and dialogic perspective, however, emphasizes the immediacy of one-on-one interactions as the primary basis of experience. Whether the explanation is centered on the actuality of being in the “thrownness” of relations (e.g., Heidegger, 1927/1962; Polster, 1998), the sharing of humanity in the I-Thou mode of relating (e.g., Buber, 1923/1970; Jacobs, 1989), or the immediate experience of alterity when looking upon the face of the other (e.g., Bloom, 2009; Levinas, 1969), Gestalt therapists further the idea presented by the approach’s founders that contact “is the simplest and first reality” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 227). In this frame, larger interpersonal perspectives, such as culture, are extensions and abstractions from this “first reality.” As a result, the deconstruction and critical analysis of culture is not seen as problematic for Gestalt therapists, since culture is only an extrapolation from the undeniable foundation of interhuman contact.

Although one-on-one interaction as the foundational basis for the totality of interhuman relationships is a compelling idea, its universal acceptance is not guaranteed. Many cultures, especially those predominantly collectivist, take the larger cultural group as the fundamental unit, providing the traditions, customs, and values that have helped in the survival and flourishing of the group. Many cultures may not doubt the fundamentality of in-group associations as the basis of interhuman relations in a similar manner that Gestalt therapists would not doubt the influence and implications of one-on-one interactions on both individual experience and interpersonal contact. Thus, the
factors considered or prioritized in the service of organismic self-regulation may look very different for culturally-diverse individuals and may not have a truly universal structure. Despite the fact that organismic self-regulation may not be a universal process in the way Gestalt therapists may ideally characterize it, the process itself is adaptable to a variety of cultures. More on this latter feature of organismic self-regulation will be discussed later.

The Presentation of Organismic Self-Regulation

By considering only the three words that make up its name, organismic self-regulation could be easily misinterpreted as to what it entails and how selfhood is defined within the process. Even some exposure to Gestalt therapy theory may not illuminate the fullness of organismic self-regulation, especially how it is implemented in therapeutic practice. This concern was expressed by Frew (2008), who wrote that the explicit and sole mention of “self” in the term may unintentionally overemphasize an individualist concept of selfhood and de-emphasize the role of relatedness and interdependence in the process. He wondered if the process needed to be renamed “organismic self-other regulation,” in order to overtly acknowledge how self-regulation is not based merely on individual needs, but can incorporate the co-occurring needs of other people. In determining if Frew’s specific suggestion of a name change or the general idea of modifying the name to reflect the overall process more accurately is needed, it would be beneficial to analyze the current label more thoroughly.
“Organismic,” the adjectival form of the noun “organism,” refers to a process characteristic of a biological life form or entity. As mentioned in previous sections, Perls was intent on connecting the biological and the psychological approach (e.g., Perls, 1947/1969a; Perls et al., 1951). Using gustatory and metabolic imagery, the overall process of need gratification was likened as either a taking in of something from the environment (like eating to sate hunger) or an expelling of something from the individual out into the environment (like excreting waste to meet eliminative demands). The biological emphasis embedded in the concept of organismic self-regulation seems to imply a sense of universality, as if the psychological form of this larger descriptive process is universal to all humans in much the same way that general metabolic processes are shared by all people by virtue of having a human physiology. The use of such a biological descriptor reflects Perls’ desire to establish a unified field theory that combines the phenomenal (psychological) and transphenomenal (physical). Yet, the unified field theory based on such a connection is hierarchical, with an implicit focus on the biological and a secondary position for the psychological (Staemmler, 2006). A final implication of the use of “organismic” to name the process is that it may be spontaneous and unconsciously enacted, in much the same way most metabolic processes are enacted without the intentional activation of the appropriate physiological systems (cf. Yontef, 1993).

“Self” as the second word is a direct modifier of the third word “regulation.” Considerable discussion of what is meant by self in Gestalt therapy has been explored repeatedly in previous sections. Its placement, further emphasized by being hyphenated,
can denote that it is the self that regulates, the self that is regulated, or both. For Gestalt therapists, it is apparent that they understand the process in a hybrid manner, that it is both the self that regulates and is regulated (Perls et al., 1951; Staemmler, 2005).

Awareness, contact, and assimilation are all activities of the self in regards to identified needs and adequate support, especially given what the environment provides. These activities are also typically changes that affect the self (creative adjustments) in light of the unique context of the temporal-spatial environment.

Changing the name could clarify the process for those unfamiliar with the Gestalt approach without too much exposure to the underlying theory. However, it would seem that such a name change would not suffice to give enough background in Gestalt therapy theory to eliminate all questions for those unfamiliar with the approach. Instead, as intimated by Frew’s (2008) comments about the term, an alteration of the name would be for the benefit of Gestalt therapists and trainees in the approach in communicating a more accurate portrayal of the process, especially as it would need to address culturally diverse clients and values. Although Frew recommended the addition of “other” in the name of the process (i.e., “organismic self-other regulation”) to directly address how an individual may choose to sacrifice a personal (independent) need to maintain relationships or satisfy others’ (interdependent) needs, it seems that interpersonal consideration and interhuman communion are part and parcel of selfhood within Gestalt therapy theory. Further, it is possible that the addition of “other” in the term might cause confusion, that individuals are responsible for regulating both themselves and others in attending to given needs. Certainly, organismic self-regulation, as understood by Gestalt therapists, does consider how certain actions may impact others involved in the larger environmental context in
order to decide which actions are enacted in the moment in response to needs and wants. In this case, Frew’s specific recommendation of how to change the name of the process may not be warranted. Yet, the general recommendation of a name change could still be considered, but instead of emphasizing interpersonal elements (i.e., organismic self-other regulation), the change warranted might come with the distal adjective (i.e., organismic self-regulation).

As noted earlier, the use of the term “organismic” seems to potentially provide three aspects to the understanding of the overall concept: universality through biological legitimacy, support for a general unitary perspective of experience, and a quality of natural, spontaneous activity. However, a number of Gestalt therapy commentators have outlined the inconsistencies and problems in confounding ideas from the psychological and biological domains, particularly in describing the contours of experience (e.g., Kennedy, 2003; Staemmler, 2006; Wheeler, 1991; Yontef, 1993). For instance, as mentioned previously, Staemmler’s (2006) analysis of the different conceptualizations among Gestalt therapists about what is a field included an extensive discussion of how the “organism/environment field” as presented by Perls and Goodman (Perls et al., 1951) is distinctly different from the “person/environment field” (or “life space”) of Lewin (1948/1997), despite the noted influence of Lewin and his field theory on the overall theoretical approach of Gestalt therapy. According to Staemmler, by using the term “organism” in their conception of field, Perls and Goodman maintained a physical-biological (transphenomenal) understanding of experience, while Lewin was concentrated on a phenomenal-psychological understanding of experience with his notion of the field. Thus, the use of the adjective “organismic” in the name of the process might
mistakenly either reduce experience to biological underpinnings or confuse philosophical terminology and methodological processes that are only appropriately understood in a certain intellectual domain (Ryle, 1949).

As Perls and Goodman, in presenting organismic self-regulation and creative adjustment, were talking specifically about human functioning – though not ignoring the animal-biological components of being human – it seems inappropriate or, at the very least, inaccurate to make explicit reference to solely the animal-biological-physical elements of human experience. In many cases, the self-regulatory actions that people engage in when creatively adjusting are not typically done at the level of physiological/metabolic functioning, since many of those systems are beyond conscious control, but rather in phenomenal adaptation and response to a situation. Yet, to replace “organismic” with another term such as “personal,” “person-based,” “phenomenal,” or the like presents its own difficulties. The former terms may unintentionally communicate a very individualist emphasis, especially when combined with self (e.g., “personal self-regulation”), which would contribute to the criticism Frew (2008) noted previously with the label of the process. The use of a latter term (e.g., “phenomenal”) may also be imprecise, in that it may overcompensate for the biological emphasis of the original label by focusing on the other component and implicitly place the transphenomenal and the phenomenal in a dualistic system, when they are not understood as diametrical qualities or so distinct from each other according to Gestalt therapy theory. Finally, if the primary goal of the use of the adjective “organismic” is to imbue the process with a sense of naturalness and spontaneity, that characteristic might very well be lost in replacing the adjective with something else or eliminating any adjective altogether. It would seem that
although the retention of “organismic” might, in turn, retain some philosophical and semantic difficulties, a larger push for therapists and trainees to embrace and understand the greater theory upon which Gestalt therapy is based might be the best way to address problems in the connotations of the name of the process, at least until a better, more accurate word can be found that would be able to express the fullness of process itself.

The Cross-Cultural Appropriateness of Organismic Self-Regulation

In thoroughly examining and analyzing organismic self-regulation, it has been shown that its presumed universality is still infused with specific values from the Gestalt approach that may have some resonance with aspects of Western cultural values at a particular level of understanding. Although organismic self-regulation is not the ultra-individualist concept reputed by some writers outside of the orientation, at a very specific level, it does maintain components of an internalized locus of control and responsibility, as well as the presumption of support in critically assessing the structures of personal experience and how various facets of that experience (e.g., ethnic/racial culture, family, sexuality, spirituality) contribute to selfhood, interpersonal relationships, and the identification and satisfaction of connected needs. However, even though organismic self-regulation might not be shared exactly in the same way regardless of cultural affiliation, the larger facet or level of the principle may still be applicable and sensitive in therapeutic work with culturally-diverse clients.

As organismic self-regulation is a principle couched in the larger Gestalt therapy theory and methodology, other theoretical and practical elements of the orientation allow for a fuller use of organismic self-regulation with culturally-diverse clients. Specifically,
the philosophical foundations of Gestalt therapy provide a strong basis for attending to
cultural differences in a way that balances respect for the identities and being of others
while helping to facilitate therapeutic movement in addressing the presenting concerns of
clients. In the following section, the implementation of Gestalt therapy methodology
specific to ethnically-diverse views of selfhood and relatedness in molding how
organismic self-regulation is relied upon in practice will be explored.
METHODOLOGICAL ELABORATION OF ORGANISMIC SELF-REGULATION REGARDING ETHNICALLY DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES OF SELFHOOD AND RELATEDNESS

Cultural Therapeutic Concerns with Organismic Self-Regulation

The Gestalt therapeutic principle of organismic self-regulation can be regarded as either a general description of natural human functioning or a frame that Gestalt therapists utilize in clinical work. The former has been explicated earlier, especially in the form of creative adjustments, the adaptive manner that humans enact when dealing with identified needs and a particular environmental context. The latter works both intellectually, as a guiding principle to how people ideally function (a theory of psychological health), and experientially, through the use of in-session experimentation to promote or regain optimal functioning (a method of therapeutic change). The intellectual therapeutic frame of organismic self-regulation was briefly discussed in a previous section, with a particular focus on the imbedded values and philosophical heritage that have been carried forth in the development of the principle.

Within the minds of some Gestalt therapists, there is likely an ideal, culturally-informed way that humans think, feel, and behave that forms the prototypical image of organismic self-regulation. This often takes the form of a natural, free-flowing process of figure formation and destruction or, in other words, an individual can identify a clear and articulated need (figure formation), adequately attend to it based on personal and
environmental resources and support, and have that need satisfied and the experience of satisfaction assimilated, such that the need moves out of awareness (figure destruction) for the next need to come to the foreground. In the actual interpersonal world, this may appear in an “I do my thing, you do your thing” approach as seemingly outlined in Perls’ “prayer” (1969b), an implicit hope that all humans, despite individual and group differences, would move to a manner in which everyone could rely on an ultimate sense of self-support in tending to personal needs. Thus, individuals would not need to worry about how their behavior would necessarily affect others, since those others were just as adept at adjusting their own behavior to attend to stress and needs.

Understanding this implicit state of affairs from a perspective that presumes independent selfhood does present major difficulties in broadening self-regulation as a universal. This tends to be the perspective taken up by psychotherapists outside of the Gestalt therapy approach, which leads to their critical view of the underlying theory and methodology of Gestalt therapists, classifying the approach as forcing an ultra-individualist way of being onto all people. Frew’s (2008) concern reflects this perspective, but from within the approach itself, that some Gestalt therapists may understand their orientation as one espousing the need to get clients to become more independent and gradually disregard how their behavior might impact others in the service of gratifying their personal desires.

For clients who have cultural values that emphasize the importance of more direct attention and consideration of how personal actions will impact larger social dynamics, especially as it involves satisfying individual desires and needs, such an interpretation of organismic self-regulation could be regarded as highly undesirable or deeply contrary to
how humans should live in the world. Some Asian groups, for example, hold in-group harmony and group cohesion as high values. An individual addressing his/her own personal needs may threaten harmony and cohesion, as time and effort are taken away from the larger group and redirected to the individual, which could impact his/her social roles or duties to the group and subsequently lead to in-group conflict and division between the individual and the rest of the group. As another example, a common theme among many Native American tribes is the interconnection between humanity and the rest of the natural world. An individual who seeks to satisfy a personal desire and consequently regards the natural world as something humans are to dominate and rely upon solely in the service of human comfort, as opposed to acknowledging the interdependence of humans and nature, may not only be judged as disrespectful by the larger group, but may also be considered to have a deep and significant corruption of her or his spirit (Deloria, 1994). In both of these examples, the respective cultural groups greatly value consideration of how an individual’s actions would impact larger social structures and how those actions that could have a negative impact on the larger group, despite how much benefit the individual might reap, are to be avoided.

Even if only a modicum of this perspective actually exists in psychotherapeutic work, it seems to fall squarely in the realm of the intellectual background for Gestalt therapists when they engage clients with their presenting problems. However, as many of its adherents are proud to acknowledge, Gestalt therapy is an experiential therapeutic approach (e.g., Bloom, 2001; Yontef, 1998). As a result, the experiential aspect of organismic self-regulation is important to examine for a fuller understanding of the implementation and experience-oriented thought regarding this principle. The contention
that will be presented and explored is that there is a level or aspect of the experiential process of organismic self-regulation that is used in the frame of therapy to attend to the difficulties of culturally diverse clients without invalidating or forcing them to reject their cultural values.

Organismic Self-Regulation as a Guiding Therapeutic Method

Organismic self-regulation can be seen as having at least two facets or levels to its elaboration. The “mesolevel” has been repeated throughout previous sections, involving a possible conceptualization of how Gestalt therapists would ideally like to see all humans behave and respond to the world, as possibly reflected in the way that Perls articulated in some of his later works (e.g., Perls, 1969b): a way of relating to one another that combined an individualist focus on solely one’s own needs and a unified collectivist response such that everyone is capable of naturally adjusting to whatever takes place in the environment or among other people. The “metalevel,” however, outlines the larger process of attending to needs in the environment, which is always creative adjustment according to Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951). It is this metalevel that accounts for the contours of how people engage the environment to meet needs and desires, as well as how people have enacted rigidified ways of behaving that are insensitive to situational contexts. On the metalevel, the therapeutic “goal” is not so much oriented to changing behavior but rather to bring awareness to those contours, such that each individual can fully be in touch with their ways of behaving and make an educated decision about whether to continue behaving in those ways or to broaden their behavioral responses. It is this level that is inherent to Gestalt therapy work, where clinical phenomenology, field
theory, and dialogic existentialism come together to attend to the individual experience of
the client. The interrelated experimental style and experiential-existential attitude of
Gestalt therapists is the practical manner that this level of organismic self-regulation is
explored, expressed, and allows for the broadening of self-experience to regain sensitivity
to context.

*The Experimental Style*

Gestalt therapists have often described organismic self-regulation as a process that
takes places quite naturally among people, whereby needs and desires are satisfied with a
minimal amount of cogitation and deep contemplation (e.g., Latner, 1973). When direct
and immediate satisfaction of needs and desires is not possible as a result of the specific
individual-environmental context, people are quick to come up with novel ways to
navigate the situation: creative adjustments. As intimated with this description, a creative
adjustment is a healthy adaptation to a particular context, a fact that sometimes is not
considered by people, as evidenced by rigidifying creative adjustments into habitual ways
of behaving, insensitive to context. The lack of awareness of how one behaves in certain
situations when attempting to meet needs is what early Gestalt therapy theorists held
would contribute to neurotic or pathological functioning (Perls et al., 1951).

An extension of this viewpoint is the challenging of a natural assumption that all
people think, feel, respond, and behave in the same ways: If I respond to a situation in a
particular manner, then I reasonably expect that others will respond similarly to that
situation. This is a common perspective shared by people, whereby the primary basis of
that expectation comes from cultural background. An experientially defining feature of
culture is that it is so comprehensive and encompassing that it is not really thought of critically until an individual is exposed to another person’s different cultural worldview. Up until that point of meeting someone culturally different, individuals implicitly behave as if all others share the same values, goals, and assumptions about the world and humanity. Further, when difference is acknowledged, all individuals from a particular cultural classification are assumed to share the same traits, beliefs, and ways of behaving. Thus, in addition to narrowing one’s own sense of self through habitual, decontextualized behaviors, individuals can also narrow self through limiting how they experience the world around them, including other people.

Gestalt therapy theorists founded their approach by beginning with individuals, though not individuals-in-isolation, which is both a theoretical and practical absurdity. For Gestalt therapists, the revelation and full integration of self can only be done through the experience of encountering and contacting others. In such an encounter, the specific contours of the individual – the complex combinations of that which makes each individual like all other humans, like some other humans, and like no other human – can be fully experienced, by both the individual and those with whom the individual is in contact. This particular type of encounter, however, is of a specific mode of relating, namely the dialogic mode, lacking in a specific objective or task to achieve, but rather a relationship founded upon deep, mutual sharing of humanness.

Dialogic relating, though foundational to human existence according to Buber (1923/1970), is not the easiest manner of relating to one another. Traumas, personal histories, and socio-cultural messages contribute to intellectualized reasons and reinforce experiential episodes that make it difficult to discern when vulnerability and openness is
safe and secure, when to trust and who to trust. Moreover, it ultimately inhibits one’s own sense of self-trust and self-support. However, instead of honing individual self-trust and learning the signs and features of contexts when dialogic relating is appropriate, a more habitual, rigidified response has been to deny most, if not all, chances at being open and vulnerable to others. There is a deep sense of withdrawal and emptiness, whether that withdrawal is also reflected overtly (e.g., avoidant/schizoid character styles) or is hidden behind a surface-level gregariousness or sociability (e.g., histrionic/narcissistic character styles). As individuals’ ways of relating become more reified, decontextualized, and scripted, the more such individuals often experience distress and interpersonal ruptures when the novelty of each episode of interpersonal contact is ignored or disregarded.

Echoing similar ideas of Gestalt therapists before and after him, Zinker (1977) noted that the purposeful work of Gestalt therapy is to reinvigorate the creative, spontaneous functions of the individual in contact with others, through rediscovering their liveliness and their capacity to discern the most appropriate way to respond to situations. Although he lists a number of “goals” that he sees in Gestalt therapy work, there are essentially three primary themes regarding these goals: awareness, responsibility, and support. These three themes are central to the broad perspective of organismic self-regulation, especially how it is explored, enacted, and assimilated through therapy work. These themes are integrated within each other, with each one depending on and being depended upon by the others, yet they form an experiential triumvirate that drives Gestalt therapeutic work, allowing for organismic self-regulation to be applicable and palatable to all clients, regardless of specific cultural background. Before entering into the elaboration of organismic self-regulation as it is enacted within
the existentially-informed experiential attitude of the approach as a way of addressing cultural differences among clients, a brief discussion of the three themes of Gestalt therapeutic work will be explored first, especially as they are found in the experimental style of Gestalt therapy.

*Awareness.*

A prominent aspect of Gestalt therapy theory and practice, awareness has been conceptualized as “the process of being in vigilant contact with the most important event in the individual/environment field will full sensorimotor, emotional, cognitive, and energetic support” (Yontef, 1993, p. 179). Gestalt therapists recognize that awareness is always relational, that it is a “self-process that happens at the interface of the individual and the rest of the field” (Yontef, 2005, p. 87). Much like the theory of self within the approach, Gestalt therapists’ conception of awareness cannot be done in isolation or without consideration of the surrounding environment of things and people. Further, awareness is not solely an intellectual exercise of passive perception, but rather an active, holistic process engaging the greater world or field of which the individual is a part. This was also noted by Merleau-Ponty (Matthews, 2006; Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2002) with his discussion of the concept of “aware agency,” again emphasizing the proactive and fully-engaged character of perception over past conceptualizations of perception as being a passive, reactive function (for discussion of the integration of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in Gestalt therapy, see Kennedy, 2003).

The way Gestalt therapists understand awareness is founded upon three components (Yontef, 1993). First, the effectiveness of awareness in navigating the world
is based upon the dominant need of the individual, which both grounds and energizes awareness. The basis of the immediate need in establishing awareness provides meaning, impact, and potency for the individual. Second, awareness is complete when the individual directly knows the reality of the situation and how he/she is in the situation. This incorporates accepting the situation and one’s self as they are, such that an action or response to the context can be done from an accurate appraisal of individual/environment field rather than based on expectations or fantasies. Finally, awareness always takes place in the present moment and is always changing and evolving. All perceptions and actions are done in the present, even if the action is recollection of the past or anticipation of the future. The past and future are unavailable to the individual except in the present. Further, the present is not a static episode of time, but rather an ongoing unfolding continuum, perpetually progressing, changing, and moving beyond itself.

The related methodological theory used by Gestalt therapists in working with awareness in therapy is the aforementioned paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970): Change takes place when individuals become who they are, not when they try to become who they are not. The guidance provided by the paradoxical theory of change incorporates the three aforementioned corollaries of awareness, where individuals explore their immediately dominant need, accept the present situation, and work from what is now instead of confusing the situation with what could be, should be, or has been. The overarching intervention Gestalt therapists use in heightening and sharpening awareness is the experiment.

As discussed in a previous section, an experiment is an intervention that systematically modifies an individual’s behavior based on that individual’s own self-
experience without the Gestalt therapist being attached to a specific outcome from the intervention itself (Zinker, 1977). Unlike more traditional behavior modification techniques, experiments are founded upon direct experiential learning: “It [the experiment] transforms talking about into doing, stale reminiscing and theorizing into being fully here with all one’s imagination, energy, and excitement” (p.123). As Kepner & Brien (1970) noted, Gestalt therapists rely upon the phenomenology of the client in guiding their own version of behavior modification instead of firmly believing that they know what is best or appropriate for the client.

Experiments are implemented from the observations of the Gestalt therapist of what is taking place in the therapeutic moment and the exact form of the experiment is based in the creativity of the Gestalt therapist. However, Gestalt therapists acknowledge that experiments are not just random games or tricks, but have a general process to their development and application. Zinker (1977) outlined multiple steps in the sequence of conducting an experiment, the majority of which take place even before a specific experiment is chosen and enacted. The “pre-experiment” steps involve establishing rapport and having explored the client’s own experience (“laying the groundwork”), securing an agreement from the client about participating in an experiment, grading the level of difficulty of the experimental work to be done based on the client, engaging the client’s own awareness and energy to an experiential theme, and generating appropriate support for the client and therapist as they enact the experiment. From here, a particular experiment is chosen, enacted, and processed through debriefing of the experience.

Awareness of a specific, immediate need is often what is experienced in experimental interventions, but Gestalt therapists agree that true, enduring change takes
place with the increased ability to be aware (Yontef, 1993) and the overall expansion of an individual ability to respond to situations (Perls, 1969b; Perls et al., 1951; Zinker, 1977). Immediate needs, of which awareness, energy, and contact are engaged to address in a given experiment, are actually worked with in therapy in the service of identifying an individual’s capacity for full awareness, which may include uncovering habitual ways that the individual avoids or disrupts awareness of needs generally. Again, the underlying thrust of Gestalt experimentation is heightening awareness, allowing for the individual to navigate needs from a place of accepting what is in the total field: in one’s self, in one’s environment, and in the complex interdependent interaction of self and the environment. It is from this point that the individual can take more ownership of and responsibility for his/her behavior and garner adequate support when dealing with needs and desires.

**Responsibility.**

For Gestalt therapists, responsibility has a dual meaning. First, responsibility is understood with its general denotation of taking ownership of behavior, acknowledging one’s own stake in an activity. This is closely linked with having and making choices in how to behave or to meet needs and desires, a direct reference to the approach’s existential heritage. Although other factors can impact or influence what choices are made or are available to the individual in any given situation, it is the individual who chooses to act or not act given those factors. Alternatively, responsibility is also understood as having the capacity to respond (response-ability) to situations through adaptations based on the situational context. Individuals often rely on repetitive or habitual behaviors to make life easier, whether to save time or for cognitive economy, but
people are not trapped by a standard set of rote reactions to situations. Rather, humans are adaptive organisms who can engage their intellects and creativity to handle novel contexts and address needs and desires in unique ways. In summary, individual responsibility is both active engagement in life and the capacity to have a breadth of ways to respond to life.

This integrated understanding of responsibility is also expressed through the use of experiments, whereby general awareness of needs is broadened (as discussed previously) and direct, experiential exploration of how clients can actively address a need in a given context takes place. In the contained and secure therapy environment, experimentally-based behavior modification is enacted such that clients can try different behaviors, practice them, and determine if they are of use or not. Again, since the spirit of therapeutic experimentation for Gestalt therapists is not tied to a specific, predetermined outcome, creativity and playfulness can be engaged, returning a sense of novelty, spontaneity, and imagination to clients’ lives. Instead of rote, robotic habits that are forced into any and all situations, clients begin to expand their ability to be aware and proactive by selecting responses that are molded from the situational context that they can be comfortable in owning and accepting as a part of them.

For Gestalt therapists, therapeutic experimentation and general psychological work aids to empower individuals into taking action and being their own change agents in their lives. Although external factors and environmental conditions influence what actions are done or what choices are available, Gestalt work around responsibility provides individuals an expanded sense of self, such that many new and different behaviors can be considered instead of a small, select group of actions, as well as ways to
cope with temporary or short-term setbacks. For the latter situation, this is couched in larger life goals and values that encompass the individuals, aiding them to accept the occasional hardship in the service of meeting much larger or longer-term goals that are aligned with assimilated values and beliefs. Such values and beliefs also give additional empowerment by bolstering attitudes and support by improving distress tolerance.

*Support.*

In the words of Parlett, support is “that which enables” (quoted in Jacobs, 2006, p. 10). For Gestalt therapists who accept this pithy definition, the implicit object of the enabling is contact. This conceptualization is often attributed to the explicit works and discussions from Laura Perls, whose “famous contribution to Gestalt therapy was her insistence on support as the implicit condition for contact” (Bloom, 2005, p. 83). In other words, contact is never unsupported. If contact happens, support was, tautologically, present to facilitate that contact. If no support is evident in a situation, contact cannot happen.

Generally, support is subdivided into two types: self-support and environmental support. In the broad psychological parlance, self-support is often understood as the capacity of an individual person to willfully act or engage in the world and, thus, is frequently synonymous with concepts such as individuation, autonomy, good ego strength, and an internal locus of control. On the other hand, environmental support is conceptualized as the extent that external resources enable individual action or agency. As a result, it is often equated to notions of symbiosis, dependence, poor ego strength, and an external locus of control. The obvious connotation noted in these
conceptualizations is that mental health and/or psychological maturity is characterized by independent agency that has the capacity to transcend environmental obstacles in the gratification of particular needs. At the same time, primary reliance on external factors and resources to meet personal desires is acknowledged as a deficit, developmental setback, or indicative of pathology. Development of this type of self-support is the ideal, while dependence on environmental support is a detriment to overcome.

To some degree, this conceptualization of self-support and environmental support has been observed in Gestalt therapy, often attributed to the writings and (especially so) in the demonstrations presented by Fritz Perls, whose therapeutic style was often dramatic, aggressive, and bluntly immediate (Bowman, 2005). Perls would often challenge patients’ implicit (and sometimes explicit) requests for him to validate or unconditionally support them as they attempted to make contact with difficult or problematic aspects of their experience. His belief was that to satisfy their request would maintain their neurotic functioning, reinforcing introjected beliefs about being unable to manage, cope, or overcome such difficulties with their own intrinsic creative abilities and to further reify their static, rigid conceptualizations about themselves (Perls, 1969b). In some ways, Perls’ therapeutic style – at least in his demonstrations, if not his actual therapy work – is analogous to the mother bird who pushes her children out of the nest in the process of “teaching” them to fly: The problem is not that clients are incapable of coping or managing their distress, but that they believe that they cannot. Once thrust into a situation where they can only rely upon themselves to cope or manage their issues, they experientially realize that they had the ability all along, much like – to use another analogy – the various characters of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, who come to learn by
the end of the story that they always had that which they thought they lacked (Baum, 1900/1996).

By contrast, Laura Perls was an outspoken proponent of providing support for patients as they navigated therapy, though she recommended caution in how much support was offered. When asked about how much support should be given, she would proffer the pithy response, “as much as necessary, but as little as possible” (quoted in Bloom, 2005, p. 84). It would appear that Laura Perls’ therapeutic style sought to integrate her husband’s more push-out-of-the-nest approach to expanding patients’ sense of self and tempering it with her own interest in the dialogical nature of the therapeutic relationship. Indeed, it has been noted that it was Laura Perls who brought in significant elements of existentialist and dialogical philosophy in the development of Gestalt therapy theory, due to her education by such noted figures as Buber and Tillich (e.g., Bowman, 2005). Thus, an analogy to characterize Laura Perls’ own therapeutic style would be that of a parent who is teaching his/her child to ride a bicycle. Although the parent may provide direct, physical support to help the child balance as he/she pedals the bicycle, the parent also experiments with when he/she needs only to provide the presence of support (i.e., not physically supporting the child on the bicycle, but ready to intervene with physical support should balance be lost) or can let the child go riding around the neighborhood while the parent watches from a stationary position.

In a contemporary context, Jacobs (2006) discussed support as being much more complex than the static conceptualizations of self-support versus environmental support, with one being ultimately healthier or preferred over the other. Instead, she acknowledged:
Supports are contextually emergent phenomena, meaning that whatever skills, capacities, and resources exist as potentiality, they can only ‘e-merge’, for use in a specific place, at a specific time, in a specific context. And the context shapes both what can emerge and what is most relevant as a support. (p. 11)

Furthermore, she asserted:

*Support always involves an interaction between the individual’s resources and the resources of the environment* [italics added]. The use of any support – so-called self-support, or so-called environmental support – requires the participation of the user. Support involves contextualization in terms of our complexly organized aspirations as well. And yet the ability to participate is built on other supports (e.g., having been supported to develop a sense of agency). Finding relevant supports calls for recognizing one’s aims and needs, which requires other supports, *ad infinitum*. (p. 12)

As noted in the above quotations, Jacobs identified how the dualism of self-support and environmental support is an inaccurate framing of support. Instead, all support incorporates specific resources or elements found within the individual and what is available in the environment in a complex interaction.

With the broad definition of support as being that which enables contact, the connection of support with creative adjustments can be seen. Again, considering how Perls et al. note that “all contact is creative adjustment of the organism and the environment” (1951, p. 230), support can be redefined as that which enables creative adjustments. However, this relationship between support and creative adjustments is not unidirectional. Instead, creative adjustments and supports are intimately interconnected, providing bases for each other: “Creative adjustments are assembled from the available supports, and each adjustment becomes a support for another creative adjustment” (Jacobs, 2006, p. 13). From this perspective, organismic self-regulation, as a key aspect to creative adjustments, relies upon support in order to be enacted.
Another quality of the interdependent nature of self-support and environmental support, which is intimated by Jacobs’ (2006) exploration of the larger idea of support, is how self-support incorporates an awareness of individual needs and resources, such that a conscious identification of when environmental supports are needed can be established. Part and parcel of self-support is acknowledgement of how individual resources are both adequate and deficient in addressing specific, contextual needs. In the case that individual resources are not enough to satisfy some need or desire, self-support also involves the facilitation of reaching out into the environment to get additional resources in the service of a more figural need. In this light, personality and ego functioning can greatly impact available self-support regarding seeking out environmental support. For instance, an individual whose personality functioning is based upon a counterdependent introject (e.g., “I should not need to get help from anyone” or “asking for help is a sign of weakness”) may find it difficult to have enough self-support to reach out for external assistance when faced with a need that cannot be fully satisfied in a solely independent way. Conversely, an individual whose personality functioning is based upon an over-dependent introject (e.g., “I cannot do anything by myself” or “my judgment is always flawed and to be doubted but the judgments of others are always perfect and trustworthy”) may find it difficult to have enough self-support to rely upon their own personal resources in situations where they may not have access to others to give assistance or when their own resources may be the most adequate in gratifying the need in question.
The Experiential-Existential Attitude

The experiential-existential attitude is intertwined with Gestalt therapists’ experimental style. Indeed, the experimental style is founded upon the emphasis on direct experience within Gestalt therapy. Direct, personal experience is the foundational basis for Gestalt therapists due to their reliance on a phenomenological approach to clinical work. As noted in previous sections, Gestalt therapists facilitate clients’ own experience as a guide to health and change rather than propose to clients a way of being that is divorced or insensitive to their experiential field. This is not to deny the existence of an objective world, per se, but rather to ground meaningful action and behavior to that which individuals have unquestioned access: subjective experience (Yontef, 1993).

Organismic self-regulation is firmly an experiential principle, as it delineates how individuals interact with the larger world. The role of experimentation in Gestalt work is to bring organismic self-regulation from the domain of mere rational cogitation and verbalizations about experience to the domain of holistic activity and more visceral experience. The danger of a sole reliance on thoughts and talking about experience is that unassimilated material (introjects) may impact what is believed and how it is talked about without any sense of intrinsic truth based on deep personal subjectivity. In enactment, however, more clarity can be achieved about what is “true” for the individual, facilitating the integration of unassimilated material that matches subjective experience and the dispensing of introjects that repress a felt-sense of self.

This process becomes grounded in an existentialist perspective through taking responsibility for actions and choices made, especially in light of the consequences, both positive and negative, that come from a selected course of action. Organismic self-
regulation as a process does not have a proscriptive viewpoint upon what choices and values are prioritized and followed through on. Rather, the outcome of healthy self-regulation is attending to the tension evident in emergent needs. Thus, if an individual is capable of heightening awareness to capture the totality of a particular situation, including the personal need evident, other factors and forces impacting or to be impacted by the need, and available resources in the context to support action (whatever that action might be), then he/she will act in a way consistent with his/her sense of self, even if it means withholding or sacrificing a personal need in the moment. Doing so with awareness and full engagement of their being indicates discernment of what the individuals are willing to accept regarding distress or negative consequences in light of whatever positive consequences and benefits may come with such an action. It is in that metalevel of organismic self-regulation that awareness, responsibility, and support co-emerge with self.

From this perspective, the experiential-existential attitude of Gestalt therapists in their approach does not presume to assert a specific manner in dealing with the world, especially the interpersonal world (a proscriptive “what”). Instead, the general outline of organismic self-regulation within the attitude reveals a larger sense of the process by which individuals can act in the world that combines their own adaptive self-beliefs and deeply held values with consideration of larger interpersonal and environmental influences (a descriptive “how”). Ultimately, it falls upon the individual to decide how to navigate life, whether it is to sacrifice personal needs and goals for a larger social group (e.g., family, neighborhood, nation) or to emphasize personal needs and goals at the expense of disrupting a larger social group. Either way, the individual makes the choice
to do so – even if the choice is to not make a choice between pursuing either personal or
group goals at the expense of the other – and must be ready to reap the consequences and
results of such a decision.

After clarification and awareness-raising of particular needs and conflicts of need
expression and/or gratification, Gestalt experimental work can practically extend the
experiential-existential attitude through cultivation of responsibility (both owning
personal agency and broadening the repertoire of behavior) based on contextually present
supports. Again, the “what” of the client is developed by the client with
phenomenological guidance from the therapist, instead of the therapist presenting
something external to the client to be introjected. The Gestalt therapist, relying on
knowledge of the process of organismic self-regulation, can use the natural manner in
which people creatively adjust to help guide, practice, and assimilate self-generated
behavior given the actuality of a situation. Adoption of the interdependent experimental
style and experiential-existential attitude allows Gestalt therapists to get into discussions
of process based on culturally diverse values and beliefs and to re-assert an examination
of that process in navigating those values and beliefs in various contexts.

Such a therapeutic approach can also help to address conflicts regarding
acculturation and racial/ethnic identity development. Again, the key in such treatment is
not to get the client to accept one or the other identity or set of cultural values. Rather it is
about providing an interpersonal space in which the client can explore the rocky terrain of
the conflict and determine for him/herself what values and identities to take on. More
importantly, it allows for the client to have expanded agency in determining how those
values and identities are expressed, taken on, or enacted given a specific environment or
experiential context. Such an approach reinvigorates the natural sense of adaptation and creativity found within individuals, especially to come up with novel solutions to specific problems, instead of feeling rigid in acting or thinking in only one way all of the time. A natural sense of flow, evident in descriptions of organismic self-regulation and the various models of contact, is re-engaged and attentive to the ever-changing landscape of life in a way that fits within the beliefs and values of the individual.

Brief Case Examples

To give a more concrete sense of what an interdependent experimental style and an experiential-existential attitude would look like in practice with culturally diverse clients, two brief cases examples will be presented. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used and significant identifying information will be altered. After both examples, a general discussion of the implementation of the metalevel of organismic self-regulation regarding the respective presenting problems and considering the differing cultural values and worldviews will be discussed.

Maria.

Maria was a 52-year-old married Mexican American female, who came to college to pursue an undergraduate degree as the first step in her career goal of helping children and families in the community. She had been born and raised for much of her life in Mexico, having lived in the United States for the past 30 years. She only learned English within the past 10 years so as to earn her GED diploma (she did not complete secondary education in Mexico) and begin to take classes at the local community college in
preparation for undergraduate work. She presented to therapy distressed after learning about her husband’s ongoing infidelity with another woman. As a result, she had been progressively depressed, lacked motivation to engage in schoolwork, and ruminated on the whereabouts of her husband whenever he was not at home, which distracted her from schoolwork and studying.

One of the primary conflicts Maria discussed in therapy was her ambivalence about how to address her marriage in light of her husband’s infidelity. She was very reluctant to confront him about it, despite the large amount of incontrovertible evidence she had collected about his extramarital affair. However, she had been willing to disclose her discovery to some of her friends and family members, including some of her grown and highly acculturated children. Further, she was confused about whether to kick him out of the house or to maintain the marriage and try to “fix things” between them. Most of the people in her life to whom she had disclosed her discovery gave her the same advice: “leave him.” Yet, Maria admitted that it was more of her duty to try to repair their relationship and to stay with him, an indirect reference to the cultural values of endurance of suffering and emphasis on perfecting personal morality found within marianismo.

In addition to feeling like she was failing to satisfy her husband, such that he had to go outside of their marriage to get what was lacking, and worrying about her general security (e.g., he was the sole earner of income in the household and for him to leave her would mean she would be without any financial resources), she also expressed feelings of shame for being “wrong” to want to stay with her husband, despite his behavior, especially with so many other people telling her that she should leave him. She had hoped that he might end his affair on his own, once he got “tired” of the other woman, but
Maria’s ongoing patience was not seemingly to be rewarded as things remained the same month after month, which contributed to her eventually coming to therapy. Her attempts to “ignore” his behavior and just let things correct themselves, while she focused on herself through reapplication of her energy and attention to schoolwork and social activities (e.g., church, friends) worked inconsistently. She would often find herself happy and motivated for a few days, before succumbing to depression and anxiety that would sabotage all the work she had focused on before her more dysphoric episodes.

Much of her work with me involved the natural initial components of therapy work: rapport building, empathic listening, and expressing understanding of her experience. Her indirect requests of me in our work during and after the initial stages of therapy paralleled her interactions with others in her life, namely that she wanted me to give her advice without having to ask for it. I also became aware of my own pull to say almost the same things her friends had been telling her. I recognized her strengths and that, by being enrolled in college, she had access to agencies and offices that could help her to manage more day-to-day, practical issues, such as finances, housing, and community resources. Thus, individual and environmental resources were available to her should she leave him, giving me more of a feeling of personal support in potentially giving that advice. However, it was not completely clear to me how much of the pull I experienced to tell her what to do was a product of my own bias versus how much of it was actually her indirect way to get me to advise her.

Instead of letting this stay in the realm of mere speculation on my part and potentially re-enact the unsatisfying pattern she had experienced with friends, I confronted her with my experience of being covertly pulled to tell her what she should
do. Our rapport up to that point, including my validation of her distress and concerns, provided the adequate support for her to admit that, indeed, she wanted me to give her advice but was too ashamed to ask me directly for it. She was also concerned that by asking for my counsel on this issue, I might tell her to do something uncomfortable or upsetting, specifically that I agreed with her friends that she should leave her husband immediately. Then, she speculated that she would feel additional shame about refusing my advice, like she had done with her friends, and regard herself as being “stupid” and “dumb” for not doing what she “should” be doing (i.e., confronting and divorcing her husband), especially since it came from an “expert.”

From this open revelation, I was more able to avoid entering into mesolevel advice-giving (content) and step back with her to examine the larger metalevel circumstances of how she navigated her life regarding making choices and acting authentically and purposefully (process). The issue then was less that she was not doing what she “should” be doing, but more that she was unsure about how she felt. We explored her tumultuous emotional life, the confusion about being loyal and loving to a man she also described as having “no morals,” and her fears about both being able to achieve her life goals without her husband and that he may be the only man that would ever love her “like a woman.” Our work together shifted into discussions of self-esteem and an emphasis on empowerment, allowing her to broaden her awareness of support and activate a sense of responsibility in eventually making a decision about how to handle the situation with her husband in a way that was most comfortable and resonant with her deeply held values and life goals.
Yoshi.

Yoshi was a 26-year-old Japanese American male, who had recently completed graduate training in massage and acupuncture, and was contemplating starting a private practice. Although he had been born and raised in the United States, he still identified with many traditional Japanese values, especially regarding emotional expression and an emphasis on material success (in the service of honoring and supporting the family). He presented to therapy with the desire to explore patterns of unfulfilling intimate relationships with women and a general lack of motivation in doing the preliminary work necessary to secure a loan (i.e., a business plan) to start his own business. He acknowledged some mild depression and worry regarding the prospects of future romantic relationships and achieving his career goals.

In exploring his relationship patterns, especially the feedback he had gotten from his last girlfriend, we discovered that a potential issue that came up in his romantic relationships was his perceived lack of being assertive. He reported that girlfriends (all of whom had been White) often complained about him being indecisive and leaving most decisions in the relationships up to them. Yoshi also admitted that he never initiated any of his romantic relationships, but rather “went along” with the advances of women. He acknowledged a sense of confusion about what he wanted out of his relationships, what he liked about his past girlfriends (apart from them seemingly having an interest in him), and what he wanted out of life in general. Although pleasant to be with in session, Yoshi did not often express emotion apart from a slight smile and the occasional joke or humorous comment. When I directly inquired about how he felt on any given occasion,
he was at a loss to either give a response other than “fine” and “okay” or to elaborate on such responses.

I became increasingly aware of my own sense of wanting him to plumb his emotional experience, for him to be able to express potential feelings of shame about being seemingly inadequate in intimate relationships and maybe even feelings of anger and frustration toward ex-girlfriends. Yet, any attempts on my part for him to give voice to those feelings were met with polite hesitance. Furthermore, Yoshi would also steer our discussions away from relationship problems to his concerns about being without motivation to follow through on his early career plans. However, he did not appear receptive to either working on a business plan or exploring his affective experience (e.g., anxiety about trying something new, frustration about how his graduate program did not prepare him for this) about starting a new business. I was feeling stuck and hypothesized that he may have felt the same way, too, but was too polite and courteous to tell me.

I felt like we had developed a strong rapport and therapeutic alliance, despite my frustrations about not making any progress on his treatment goals, so I confronted him about my belief that more clarity about both his relationship and motivation issues may be found with exploring his emotional life and how I felt perplexed about our inability to adequately explore that terrain. He disclosed that he, too, thought they may be connected and that his emotional experience may be the important place to begin work, but had difficulty with even knowing what he felt about anything. He acknowledged that he had vague needs of wanting to be in an intimate relationship and wanting to progress on career goals, but was unclear about what exactly that would look like and what the associated feelings with those needs were. He described accessing his emotional
experience as if coming up to a large, tall “brick wall,” behind which was his affective life.

My own bias to give practical advice on what he should do to work on his business plan or how he should be in relationships was halted and we were able to begin to explore the “brick wall” and all the aspects of the bricks that made up the wall. Here, we explored and discussed interpersonal messages and cultural values about propriety, emotional discipline, and expectations in relationships in a space where everything he experienced and expressed was looked at with authentic curiosity and genuine validation. We examined his confusion about conflicting messages and values he struggled with between being a “man” as that is implicitly understood in American culture – including being “strong,” “assertive,” and not having feelings – and traditional Japanese values that had been instilled in him in his family – including “deferring” to family, not “admitting to feelings,” and focusing on being “successful” in career. Thus, our work became focused on giving space in therapy for Yoshi to get in touch with what his goals in life were (whether personal goals or goals from the family) and how these myriad values and ideas could be used in service of those goals. I was also able to more directly validate his sense of confusion and disappointment at not being able to be “everything for everybody” all of the time.

*General discussion.*

In both of the presented cases, cultural values were discovered to be playing a vital role in the respective backgrounds of clients’ experiential fields. My initial frustrations or pull to be in a more directive, advice-giving mode may likely have been
informed by my own biases about the importance of expressing emotions in a particular way and taking more direct action in addressing particular problems. However, with the help of supervisors and colleagues, I was able to become aware of my thoughts and intentions. My ability to respond to my clients could be broadened in a way that I could actively own my behavior, and have a sense of what supports were available to me in addressing my own internal experience with my clients. From one perspective, this allowed me to step back from the mesolevel of organismic self-regulation (i.e., as a specific form of action or behavior) to the metalevel of organismic self-regulation (i.e., as a general process of navigating the world through awareness, responsibility, and support).

As observed in the case of Maria, her sense of being powerless or without any choice in her situation was supportively challenged by acknowledging how she was making active choices, even if those choices were to avoid certain other choices. From this standpoint, we were able to assess how her choices were benefitting her or causing her difficulty and to explore potential alternative ways of acting that were aligned with her values, beliefs, and life goals. This aided in interrupting her self-defeating cycle of resisting introjects from others that she would simultaneously value, thus, making her feel “dumb” and hopeless in managing her current life circumstances. It also allowed me to avoid merely replacing one set of introjects (from others) with another set (from me), further disempowering her.

In the case of Yoshi, my therapeutic bias of a specific type of emotional expression was challenged by my realization of the various cultural values at play in directing his behavior. Instead of getting wrapped up in a power struggle between my desire for him to express emotion and his background of cultural values that restricted the
circumstances for emotional expression, we were able to explore what these values meant for him and how they impacted (both positively and negatively) his life goals. Again, it allowed us to honor his cultural values without me coming in and invalidating or denigrating them as unhealthy or pathological. Yet, therapeutic movement took place from the position of him being more able to own the totality of his experience, which allowed his perceived internal conflict to gain some resolution, as the two sides were revealed to be seeking the same goals, but in different ways.

In both of the aforementioned cases, I was able to reorient my therapeutic work from my own frustrations and struggles (which may have likely been experienced by my clients, as well) by returning to the basic experiential-existential attitude to guide my thinking and being with my clients. In reestablishing my clinical attitude to the subjective experience and personal values of my clients, I was able to make our therapy directly meaningful to them, which allowed them to engage culturally-appropriate levels of individual agency in addressing their presenting issues. Furthermore, my clinical reorientation was further supported by engaging in an interdependent experimental style, where therapy could focus on the clients’ extent of awareness about themselves and the world around them, their sense of responsibility in owning their experience and their capacity to respond to situations, and discernment and cultivation of supports. This style and attitude helped me to relinquish ultimate control over struggling with getting my clients to behave, think, or feel in specific ways – which may not be sanctioned by their respective cultural backgrounds – and the frustration of them not changing in the way I wanted them to. Additionally, it likely reduced the power struggle between my clients and me, as well as countered any implicit guilt or shame my clients could have felt in not
being able to change in the ways I wanted them to. Instead, the dual clinical approach became a collaborative process from which my clients could have their cultural backgrounds, values, and worldview honored and possibly more explicitly explored, especially with regards to how those aspects impact their lived experience. All of this work, thus, served to reinvigorate self-regulation for each client in a way resonant with his/her experiential field, by guiding them to consider their subjective experience as a foundation to making sense of their world and to be more aware of the supports present for them or more discriminative in which supports are beneficial in which contexts. These components in the therapy would contribute to improved navigation of need fulfillment in the myriad situations of the clients’ lives, which is what the general principle of organismic self-regulation is about.
CONCLUSION

Multiculturally-informed psychologists have raised significant concerns about the applicability and sensitivity of most theoretical orientations to culturally diverse clients. The concerns have revolved around how implicit values in most theoretical orientations, which were developed from a Western-individualist worldview, may pathologize and invalidate differing cultural and collectivist worldviews in the process of therapy. Gestalt therapy, as a therapeutic orientation whose adherents espouse a general sense of cultural sensitivity throughout its theoretical background and clinical application, was examined as a specific example of a Western-developed psychotherapy, which may have embedded individualist values that would be expressed without awareness in the work with diverse clients. Of specific concern was the grounding principle of organismic self-regulation as being culturally-biased instead of being a universal concept, applicable regardless of cultural differences.

In examining the larger philosophical and theoretical background of Gestalt therapy in order to provide context for the principle of organismic self-regulation, it was determined that different levels or facets of this principle exist, one of which is firmly embedded with more individualist-accessible values that might not fully resonate with values from cultures tending towards collectivism (i.e., the mesolevel). The other level, however, appears to delineate a process that is divorced from a particular cultural worldview and presents a general way of acting in the world common to all humans (i.e., the metalevel). Although the two levels of organismic self-regulation are connected to
each other, the implementation of the metalevel in therapy is evident in the framing of therapeutic work within the three philosophical foundations of the Gestalt approach, namely clinical phenomenology, field theory, and dialogic existentialism, and because of the emphasis of the three thematic goals in Gestalt work (i.e., awareness, responsibility, and support).

Engagement of Gestalt therapeutic work with the philosophical foundations and thematic meta-goals, all of which finds expression through the experimental style of Gestalt work and the experiential-existential attitude associated with the approach, gives Gestalt therapists the capacity to provide culturally sensitive treatment that allows for the valuing and honoring of differing values and worldviews and minimizes, if not fully avoids, the impact of superimposing an individualist frame as a proscription for the behavior of culturally diverse clients. The key in achieving this therapeutic stance is familiarity with, understanding of, and adherence to the underlying theory and philosophical foundations of the approach, which are intimately tied to the metalevel of organismic self-regulation.

Thus, difficulties with the conceptualization and application of organismic self-regulation, and possibly the larger comprehension of Gestalt therapy theory in general, may be linked to perceived deficiencies or inconsistencies with how Gestalt therapy training and education is done. Indeed, in addition to pointing out the potential blind spot of how organismic self-regulation is conceptualized, Frew (2008) also notes how training of Gestalt therapists is a significant limitation for the approach. It is possible that difficulties around the understanding and implementation of organismic self-regulation in a way that is sensitive to various worldviews and value systems may be attributable, to
some degree, to issues in training and who can legitimately refer to themselves as Gestalt therapists. Those therapists who participate in weekend workshops or one-day trainings involving Gestalt therapy may pick up examples of intervention techniques to use in treatment with clients and, thus, may refer to themselves as either Gestalt therapists or implementing Gestalt therapy into their clinical work. However, as many Gestalt therapists have noted and warned, use of techniques and interventions commonly associated with Gestalt therapy (e.g., empty chair work, two-chair work) does not automatically mean that one is practicing Gestalt therapy (e.g., Bloom, 2005; Yontef, 1993). Instead, Gestalt therapy involves a strong grounding in the underlying theory, such that interventions and techniques are intentionally implemented from the standpoint that recognizes the approach’s theory of change (i.e., the paradoxical theory of change) and the principle of human functioning (i.e., organismic self-regulation). Thus, a future direction to be examined regarding organismic self-regulation could be in how it is understood and utilized by those identifying as Gestalt therapists or using Gestalt therapy in their clinical work.

Another avenue for examination, which may be associated with another limitation to Gestalt therapy, is the extent in which theoretical consistency is achieved within the approach. Gestalt therapists have noted how the orientation was developed from a variety of sources and fields, yet discussions, articles, and commentaries still abound in attempting to clarify discrepancies and inconsistencies within the theoretical foundation of Gestalt therapy. Examples of these conceptual inconsistencies include the confusion about field theory and the concept of what a field is (e.g., Staemmler, 2006) and the meaning and process of contact (e.g., Melnick, Robine, Schack, & Spinelli, 2007).
Gestalt therapists’ confusion and struggle with conceptual clarity among the myriad ideas and philosophies that many incorporate or rely upon is a natural process of full assimilation rather than static introjecting. At the same time, this also impacts the aforementioned difficulties with training, as debates still rage on about very basic terms and vital principles to the theoretical approach.
REFERENCES


