

Gestalt Psychology. Gestalt theory was one of the major schools of psychology of the first half of the twentieth century. While its main early focus was a protest against the atomism or elementism that characterized its rival schools (such as structuralism and functionalism and, later, behaviorism), its emphasis on the organized, integrated nature of psychological entities and processes has continued to influence the field throughout the remainder of the century. The German word *Gestalt*, roughly meaning "structure," "whole," "form," or "configuration," has no exact equivalent in English, so the term has become part of the technical vocabulary of psychology.

Gestalt psychologists rejected the "constancy hypothesis" that was generally taken for granted early in the twentieth century, namely that there is a constant point-for-point correspondence between physical characteristics of a stimulus and the psychological attributes of the resulting sensation. In numerous experiments they demonstrated that local perceptual qualities vary not just with the local stimulus but with the contexts that surround the stimulus. Percepts are not immutable correlates of the local physical stimuli that give rise to them, but reflect specific interactive relational aspects of a stimulus complex. The well-known perceptual constancies (size, shape, color, brightness, etc.) are all inconsistent with the "constancy hypothesis": for example, the perceived brightness of a small spot in a large visual field depends upon not only the light intensity of the spot itself but also the intensity of the spot's surround. Comparably, color contrast phenomena disprove the "constancy hypothesis"; the same gray circle will appear greenish if surrounded by violet, or yellow if surrounded by blue. Perceptual attributes such as size, shape, color, brightness, movement, etc., are *relationally determined*.

Relational determination also plays a crucial role in many cognitive (and physiological) functions other than sensation and perception. While it is central in perceptual organization (as in controlling what aspects of a complex sensory input will be perceived as figure and which as ground), it is also at the core of productive thinking. To solve a problem productively, it is necessary to understand what aspects of it are essential and which superficial or irrelevant, as well as the critical interrelations among the core aspects. In most psychological wholes or Gestalten the parts are not indifferent to each other, but are mutually interdependent; indeed the attributes of the separate component parts of the Gestalt are determined by their place, role, and function within the whole of which they are parts. Productive thinking involves transforming a confused, fuzzy, meaningless view of a problem into a clear conception of it that takes all the relevant features into account; such reorganization or restructuring of the problem results in insight, understanding, and its solution, if the reorganization is adequate to the central features of the problem.

This view of problem solving, and of learning, contrasted sharply, in its emphasis on meaningfulness, with the views of learning that prevailed in other schools, which instead emphasized blind contiguity in space and time (as in traditional associationism and as in the process of classical conditioning that was considered prototypic of learning by behaviorists). The top-down approach of the Gestalt theorists, making the whole primary, was the opposite of the bottom-up approach typical of psychologists in other schools, which began with "elements" (such as sensations, or stimuli and responses) and studied how they combine to add up to a whole. Reference: Wertheimer, M. (2000). Gestalt Psychology. In A.E. Kazdin (Ed.), The encyclopedia of psychology (Vol. 3, pp. 486-489). Washington, DC/New York: American Psychological Association/Oxford University Press.

Gestalt *n.* an entire perceptual configuration (from German: "shape," "configuration," "totality," "form"), made up of elements that are integrated and interactive in such a way as to confer properties on the whole configuration that are not possessed by the individual elements.

Configuration: the particular arrangement or pattern of a group of related things.

atomism *n.* 1. the view that psychological phenomena can best be understood by analyzing them into elementary units, such as sensations or conditioned responses (...)

Structuralism defined psychology as the study of mental experience and sought to investigate the structure of such experience through a systematic program of experiments based on trained INTROSPECTION.

Functionalism: (which is) defined...as the science of mental activities as they function in adapting the individual to the environment.

Stimulus: *n.* (pl. stimuli) 1. any agent, event, or situation — internal or external — that elicits a response from an organism.