

we do *not* go off together, we'll regret it, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of our lives'. Either decision is likely to generate joy as well as sorrow. Sometimes there is no way out, no dominant need or satisfactory conclusion.

In the 1960s Fritz Perls expounded a rather self-centred version of self-other regulation, which seemed to prioritise the hedonistic needs of the individual over those of the community. However, the early Gestalt literature recognised that as people are essentially social and relational beings, forming an interactive whole with their environment, their self regulation must inherently involve consideration of other people and of that environment. The Gestalt theory of self regulation encompasses, and has always encompassed, the whole irreducible complexity of the individual within the field and could perhaps more consistently be called self-other regulation, as it is here.

The individualistic stance that Fritz Perls glorified in his ode to Gestalt 'I do my thing and you do your thing' is a reductionistic misrepresentation of Gestalt self-other regulation, probably meant to shock or shake fixed attitudes. Even Perls at other times spoke in terms of the interdependence of individual and community:

The man who can live in concerned contact with his society, neither being swallowed up by it nor withdrawing from it completely, is the well-integrated man . . . Our approach . . . sees the human being as simultaneously and by nature both an individual and a member of the group. (Perls, 1976: 26, 52)

The needs of the group and of the environment are as much the subject matter of Gestalt field theory as the needs of the individual (Clarkson, 1991b; E. Polster, 1993). Commonality and individuality are interconnected polarities within the field and we need to be open to and prepared to explore both poles of the individual-communal continuum in the therapeutic relationship (Fox, 1994).

Cycle of self/other contact

Perls crystallised the sequence of organismic self-other regulation into what he called the 'cycle of the interdependency of organism and environment' (1969a). This cycle has since been renamed 'the process of contact', 'the cycle of contact', 'the cycle of awareness' and 'the cycle of gestalt formation and destruction'. Long-winded though it is, I like Perls's original name because it reminds us of

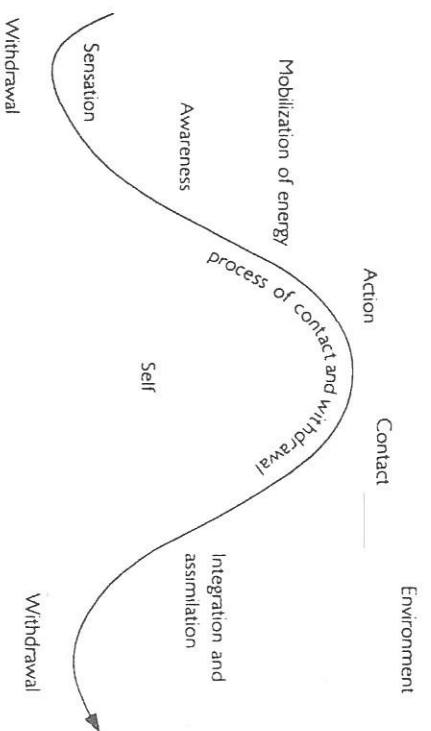


Figure 1.6 Interactive cycle of contact - withdrawal of organism and environment (inspired by Zinker, 1978)

the intrinsic interdependence of people and their environment in a way that has been rather lost in the subsequent titles.²

The cycle of the interdependence of the organism and environment (or the interactive contact cycle)² describes the phases in the formation of a single figure of interest/need against the background of the rest of the field in the overall process of self-other regulation (see Figure 1.6). It illustrates the phases of a single episode of contact between the individual and the environment. Although it has frequently been illustrated as a circle, I propose that Zinker's diagram of a wave better illustrates the fluid, organic rising and falling of the formation and destruction of a figure of interest.

Waves of contact and withdrawal can be short - for example when we hug another person or do our teeth - or longer, as when we engage or are engaged with a large experience such as writing a book, studying for a degree, mourning the loss of a parent or raising a child. The longer cycles of contact and withdrawal will encompass many shorter cycles within the overall undertaking or experience. Human life is made up of waves of contact and withdrawal - we all go through many waves every day, responding to the stimulus of an inner sensation, such as hunger or loneliness, or to an outer disturbance such as noise, or a call from a friend.

2. Zinker (1994) has recently called it the interactive cycle, which does capture the interdependence of the original title.

