

Gestalt Psychology

By Amy Quarton

Discussion Questions

- What is gestalt psychology?
- What are the principles of perceptual organization?
- How did Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Köhler establish gestalt psychology?
- How did gestalt psychology spread to the USA?
How did Kurt Lewin spread gestalt psychology?
- How did gestalt psychology impact the field of psychology?



What is gestalt psychology?

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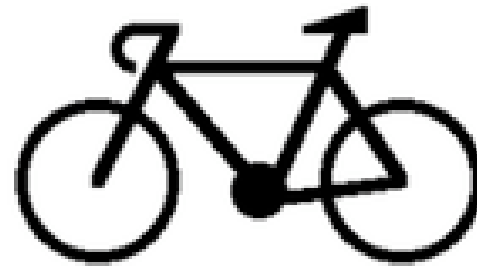
- In the **early 1910s**, German scholars established a macroscopic approach called **gestalt psychology**.
 - "Gestalt" means "shape" in German.
 - It was founded by **Max Wertheimer**, **Kurt Koffka**, and **Wolfgang Köhler**.
 - They studied perception, learning, and problem solving.
 - By the **1920s**, it was popular in Germany and in the USA.

What is gestalt psychology?

- It disagreed with structuralism and functionalism.
 - In 1926, Max Wertheimer said we perceive the whole sum of objects (not their individual parts).
 - In 1886, Ernst Mach (1838-1916) said the whole experience of an object is more important to perception than the experience of just its individual parts.

What is gestalt psychology?

- **Wolfgang Köhler's** quote became their mantra:
"The whole is different from the sum of its parts".

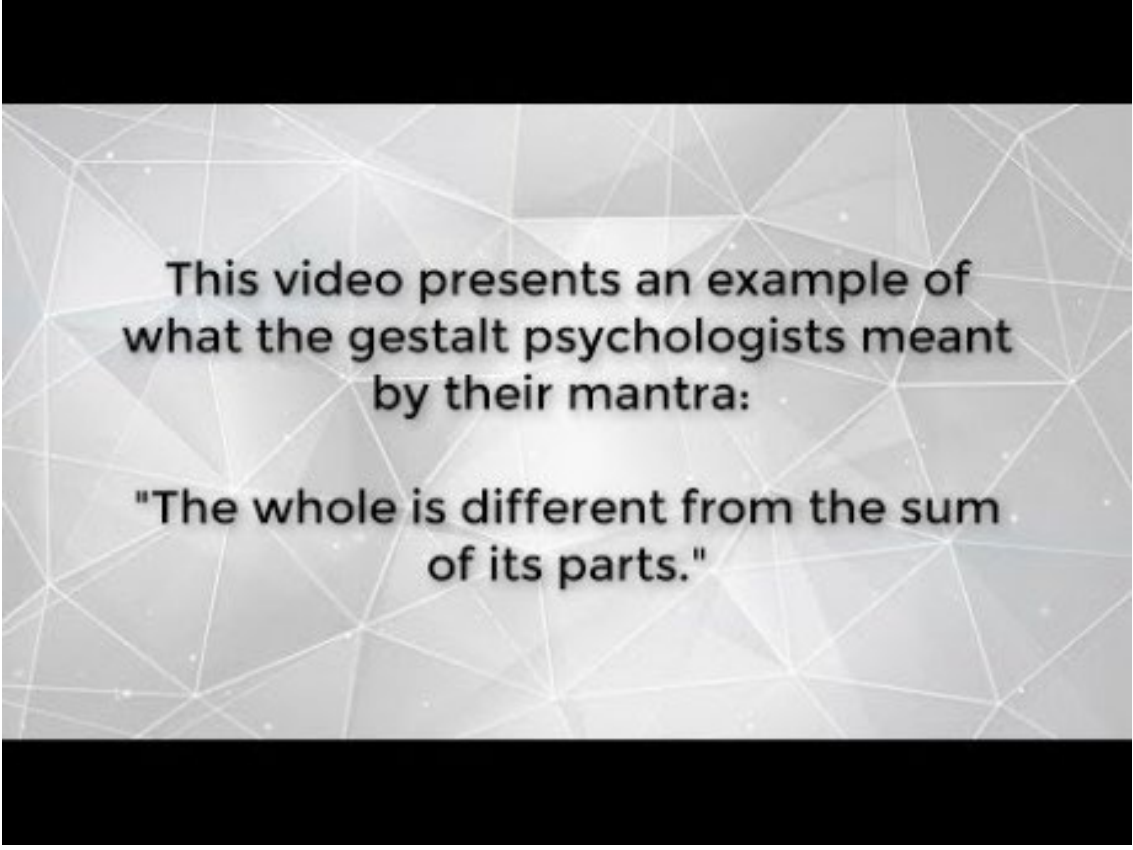


What is gestalt psychology?

- **Christian von Ehrenfels** said some qualities of experience persist even if the elements change.
 - A song (the whole) consists of notes (the parts).
 - The song (the whole) is recognizable even when the key changes or the instrument changes (the parts).



What is gestalt psychology?

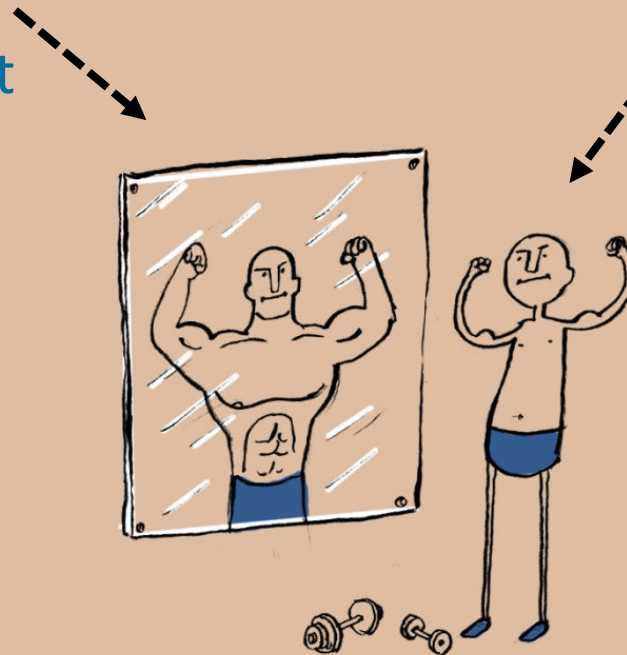
The image shows a video player window. The background of the video area is a light gray with a complex, abstract geometric pattern of thin white lines forming various polygons and triangles. The text is centered on this background. The video player has a solid black bar at the top and bottom.

This video presents an example of
what the gestalt psychologists meant
by their mantra:

"The whole is different from the sum
of its parts."

What is gestalt psychology?

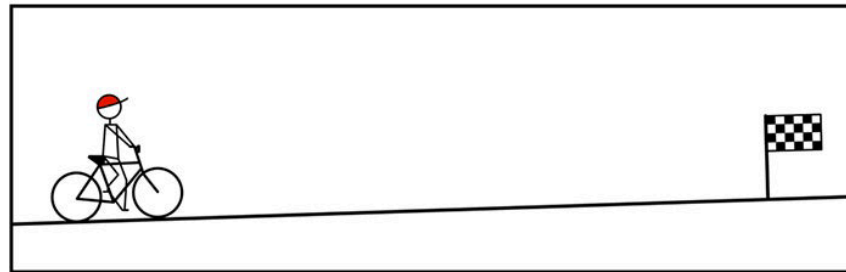
- In 1935, Kurt Koffka made a distinction between our perceptions and reality.
- The behavioral environment is the world as we perceive it.
- The geographical environment is the world as it is in reality.



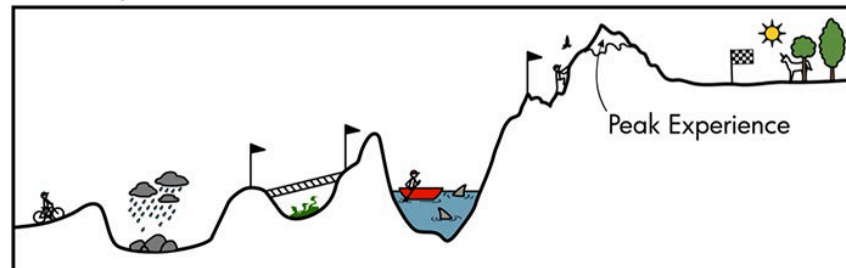
What is gestalt psychology?

- A match = our perceptions are accurate.
- A mismatch = our perceptions are inaccurate.

Your plan



Reality

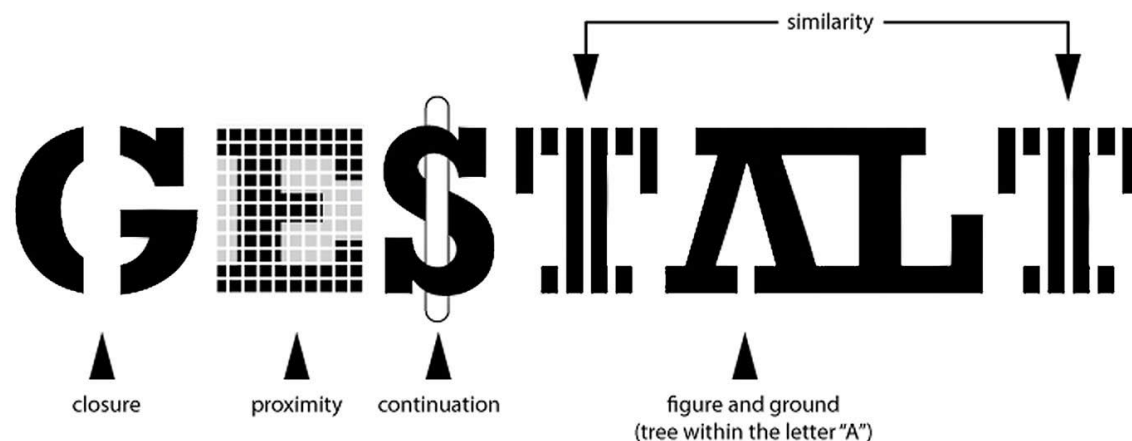




**What are the principles of
perceptual organization?**

What are the principles of perceptual organization?

- To explain how bits of information are organized into meaningful wholes, gestalt psychologists established **principles of perceptual organization**.
- These principles were said to help humans make the most reasonable guess about the nature of reality.



What are the principles of perceptual organization?

- All of the organizing principles have one thing in common: the **law of simplicity**.
 - Also known as prägnanz, it is the tendency to perceive ambiguous or complex objects in their simplest form.



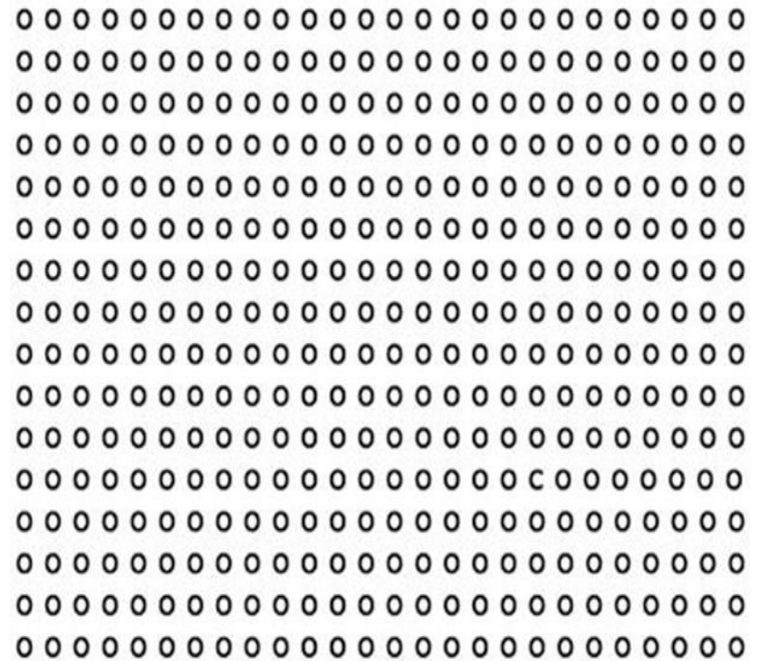
What are the principles of perceptual organization?

- The **figure-ground principle** is the tendency to perceive an object as part of either the foreground (figure) or the background (ground).
 - By changing the focus of our attention, we can reverse the figure-ground relations.



What are the principles of perceptual organization?

- Hedwig von Restorff identified the **isolation effect**.
 - It occurs when an object in an information array stands out, attracts attention, and is more easily recalled than the other objects.



What are the principles of perceptual organization?

- The **proximity principle** is the tendency to group together objects that are close to one another.
 - Even if the objects are different, they appear as a group because they are close to one another.

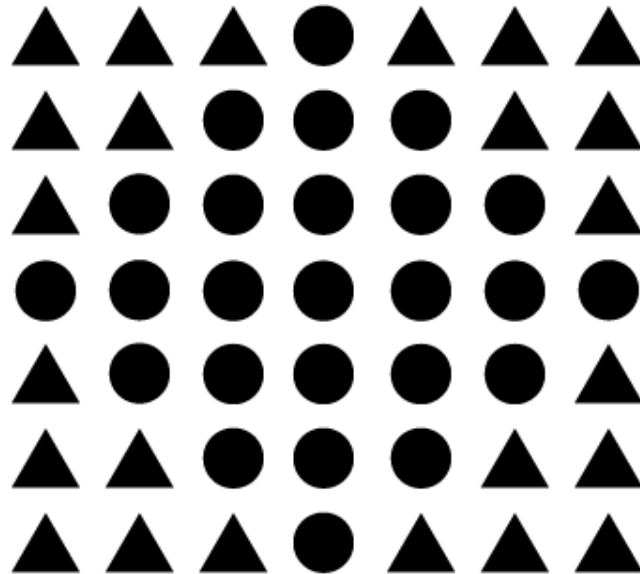


These groups appear to be separated by color or contrast.



Proximity overpowers other signals of distinction, as seen in this example.

What are the principles of perceptual organization?



- The **similarity principle** is the tendency to group together objects that appear to be similar.
- Groupings occur across a variety of characteristics, including shape, color, and size.

What are the principles of perceptual organization?

- The **continuity principle** is the tendency to perceive lines as part of a continuous movement.
 - The goal is to minimize abrupt changes.



Parts



Whole

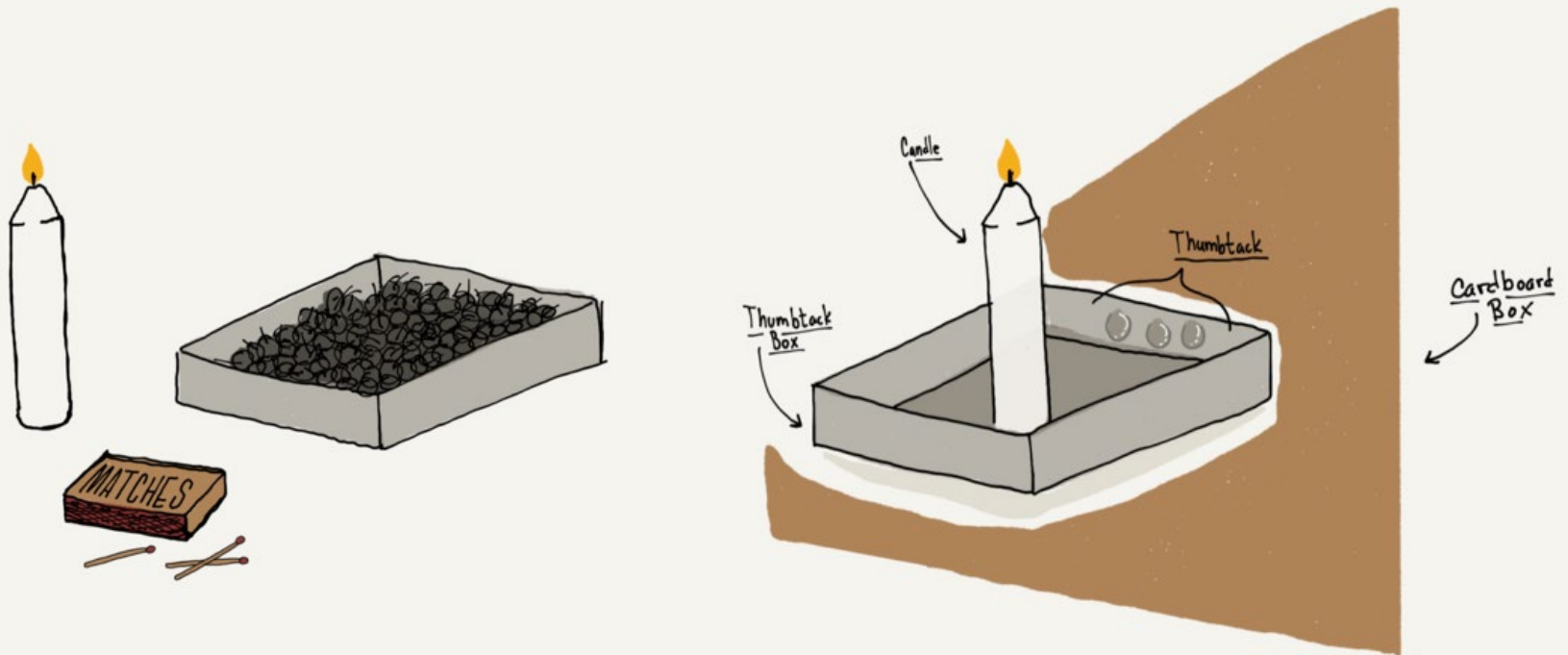
What are the principles of perceptual organization?

- The **closure principle** is the tendency to look for a recognizable pattern in incomplete figures.
 - The mind fills in missing information.



What are the principles of perceptual organization?

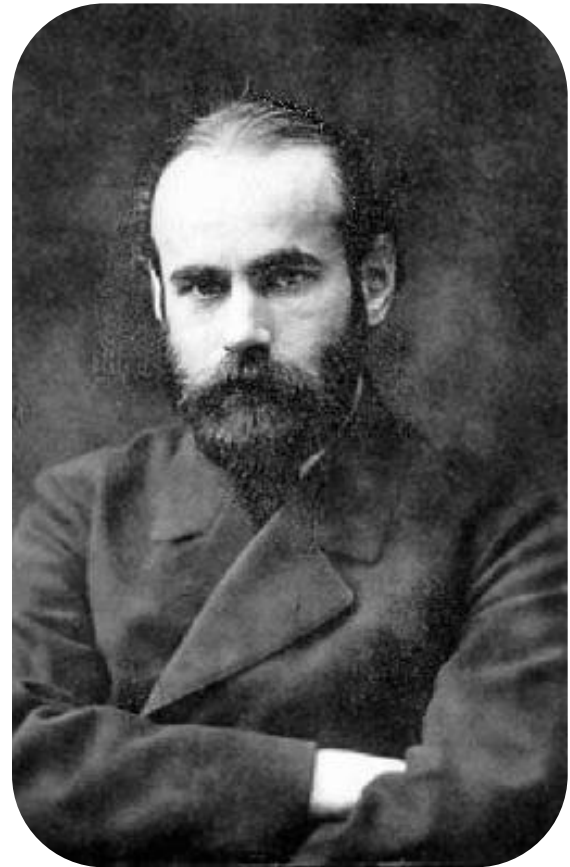
- **Karl Duncker's** (1903-1940) **functional fixedness** is a cognitive bias that prevents us from thinking beyond the typical function of an object.



**How did Max Wertheimer,
Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang
Köhler establish gestalt
psychology?**

Who is Max Wertheimer?

- **Max Wertheimer** (1880-1943) was a German psychologist.
- In **1904**, he earned a PhD from the University of Würzburg and studied with Külpe.
 - He also studied at the University of Berlin with Stumpf and Müller.

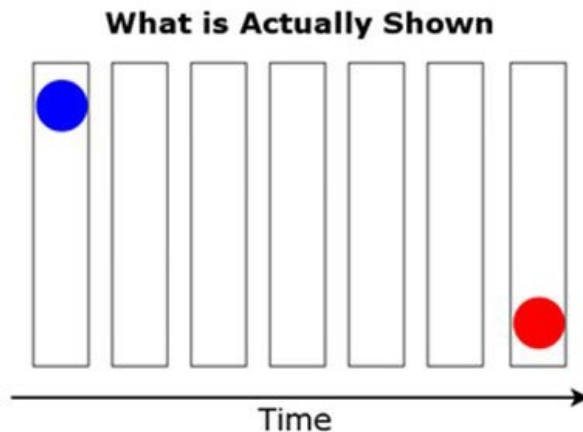


How did Wertheimer establish gestalt psychology?

- In 1910, he started teaching at the University of Frankfurt, where he met Kurt Koffka.
- In 1912, he published the founding article, *Experimental Studies on the Perception of Movement*.
- In 1923, he wrote about the principles of proximity, similarity, and good continuation.
- In 1933, he began promoting his ideas in the USA.

How did Wertheimer establish gestalt psychology?

- The **phi phenomenon** occurs when rapid sequences of sensory events (flashes of light) create the illusion of motion.
 - This principle forms the basis for motion pictures!



Who is Kurt Koffka?



- Kurt Koffka (1886-1941) was a German psychologist.
- In 1909, he earned a PhD from the University of Berlin and studied with Stumpf.
- From 1910 to 1913, he and Köhler assisted Wertheimer.

How did Koffka establish gestalt psychology?

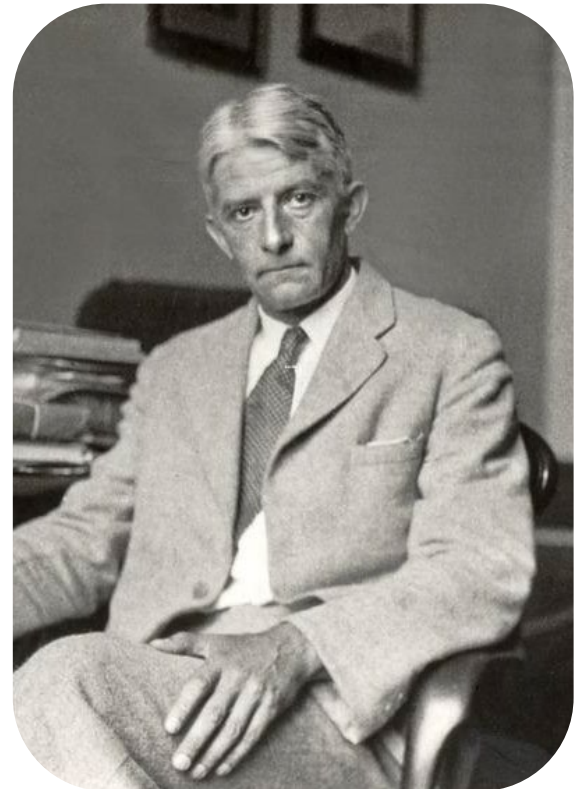
- In **1921**, he applied it to developmental psychology in *The Growth of the Mind*.
- In **1922**, he introduced gestalt psychology to the USA with his article "Perception: An Introduction to Gestalt-Theorie".
- In the **mid-1920s**, he was a visiting professor at both Cornell University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

How did Koffka establish gestalt psychology?

- In 1927, he moved to the USA.
 - From 1927 to 1941, he taught at Smith College.
- In 1935, he wrote about perception, learning, and memory in his book, Principles of Gestalt Psychology.
 - It helped united other gestalt psychologists.

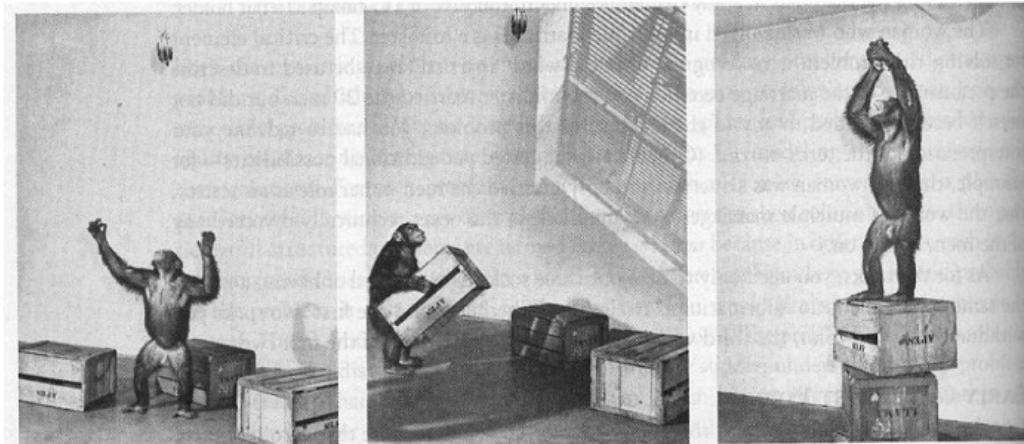
Who is Wolfgang Köhler?

- **Wolfgang Köhler** (1887-1967) was a German psychologist.
- In **1909**, he earned a PhD from the University of Berlin and studied with Stumpf.
- From **1910 to 1913**, he and Koffka assisted Wertheimer.



How did Köhler establish gestalt psychology?

- In the 1910s, he spent 6 years observing chimpanzee behavior on the Canary Islands.
 - He watched them solve problems.
 - They learned to “think outside the box”.



How did Köhler establish gestalt psychology?

- In 1917, he published *The Mentality of Apes*.
 - He disagreed with Thorndike's trial-and-accidental-success learning.
 - Solutions to problems appear quickly through insight, a sudden perceptual rearranging of the elements of the problem situation into a new configuration.
 - With Thorndike's cats, no insight was possible because they could not see the entire problem situation.

How did Köhler establish gestalt psychology?

- During WWI, he was accused of being a spy!
 - After WWI, he succeeded [Stumpf](#) at the University of Berlin's Psychology Institute.
- In [1929](#), he criticized introspection in *Gestalt Psychology*.
 - It was more popular than [Koffka's](#) book because it was shorter and easier to read.



How did Köhler establish gestalt psychology?

- In 1935, he moved to the USA.
 - Although he was not Jewish, he was appalled by the Nazi interference in academia.
 - He first taught at Clark University and then at Swarthmore College.
- In 1958, he was elected president of the APA.

**How did gestalt psychology
spread to the USA? How did
Kurt Lewin promote it?**

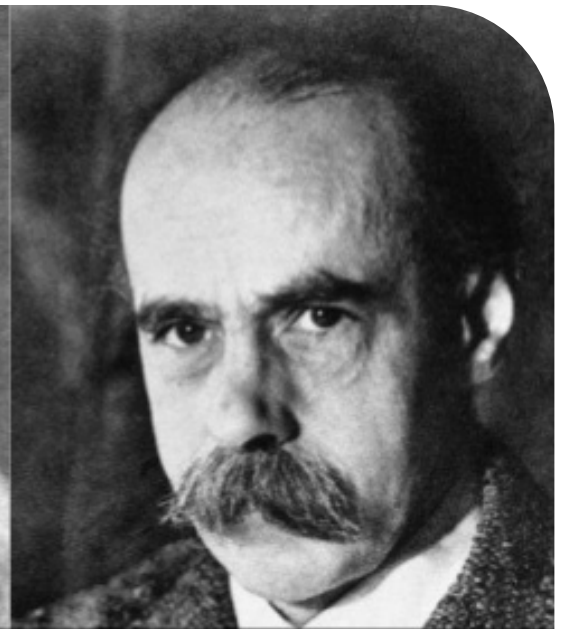
How did gestalt psychology spread to the USA?



Wolfgang Köhler



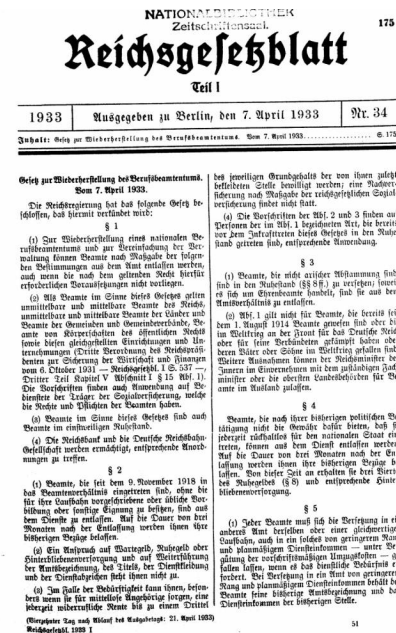
Kurt Koffka



Max Wertheimer

How did gestalt psychology spread to the USA?

- Years before WWII began in 1939, the Nazi regime began to rise in power in Germany.
- In 1933, Hitler established the "Law for the Reestablishment of the Professional Civil Service".
- It removed all Jewish people from positions funded by the state.
- This included university professors!



How did gestalt psychology spread to the USA?

- As a result, many Jewish psychologists fled from Europe and immigrated to the USA.
 - In 1927, Kurt Koffka moved to Massachusetts.
 - In 1933, Max Wertheimer and Kurt Lewin both moved to New York.
 - In 1935, Wolfgang Köhler left Germany.
 - In 1938, Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud left Austria.

How did Kurt Lewin promote gestalt psychology?



- **Kurt Lewin** (1890-1947) was a German social psychologist and promoter of applied psychology.
- In **1914**, he earned a PhD from the University of Berlin and studied with Stumpf.

How did Kurt Lewin promote gestalt psychology?

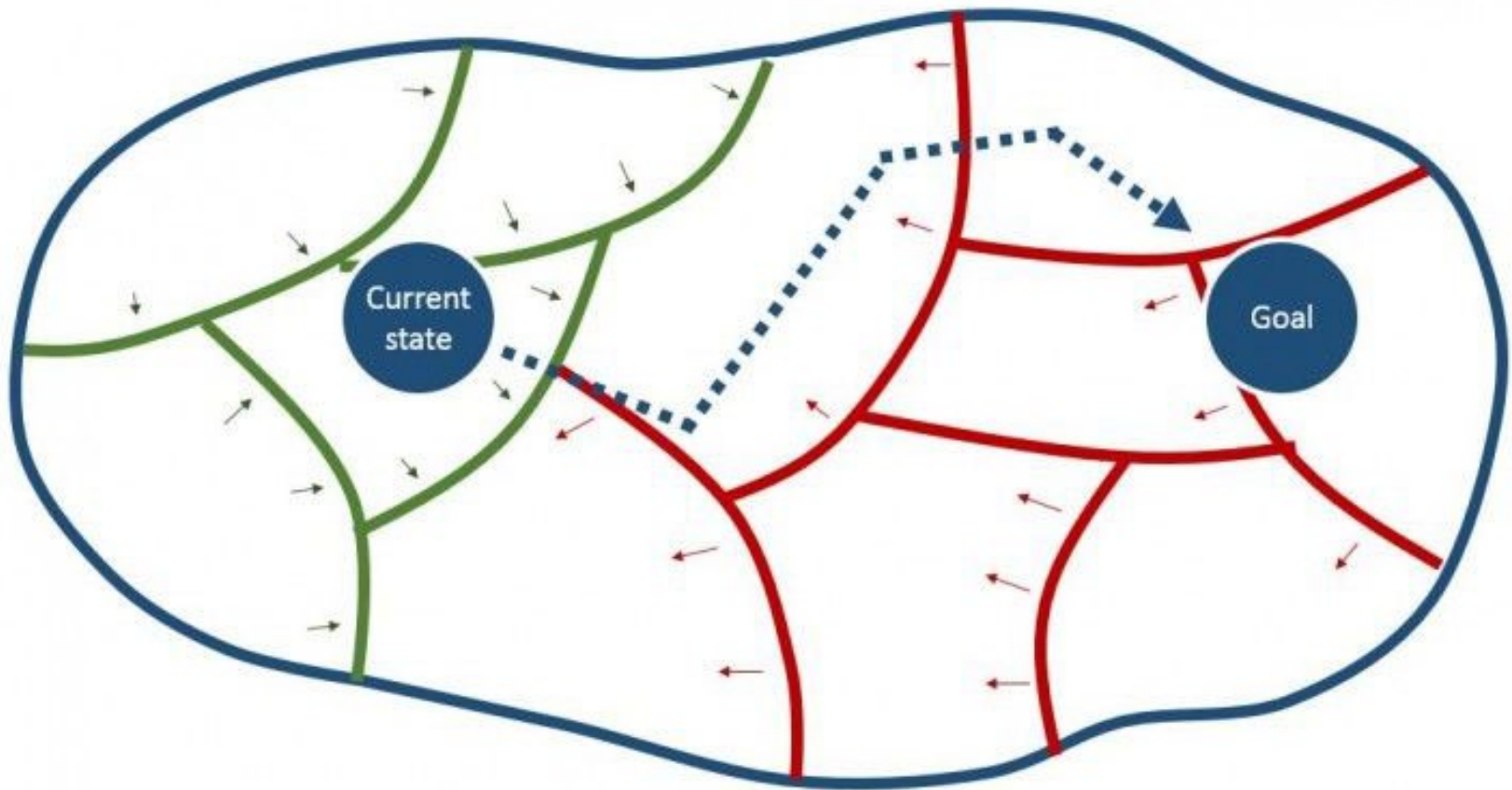
- After serving in WWI, he worked with **Wertheimer** and **Köhler** at the Psychological Institute.
 - He also befriended **Koffka**.
 - He established a research program, recruited graduate students, and developed an international reputation.
- Cornell University hired him in **1933**.
 - He changed the pronunciation of his name from "Le-veen" to "Lou-in".

How did Kurt Lewin promote gestalt psychology?

- Compared to the major gestalt psychologists, Lewin was more interested in motivation.
- According to **field theory**, understanding human behavior (B) requires knowledge of all the personal (P) and environmental (E) forces acting on a person in a given moment.

$$B = f(P, E)$$

How did Kurt Lewin promote gestalt psychology?



How did Kurt Lewin promote gestalt psychology?

- Lewin and his students completed a number of action research projects such as:
 - A study of in-group loyalty that compared Catholic and Jewish college women.
 - A study that examined different patterns of interracial housing.
 - A study on ways to train effective leaders.

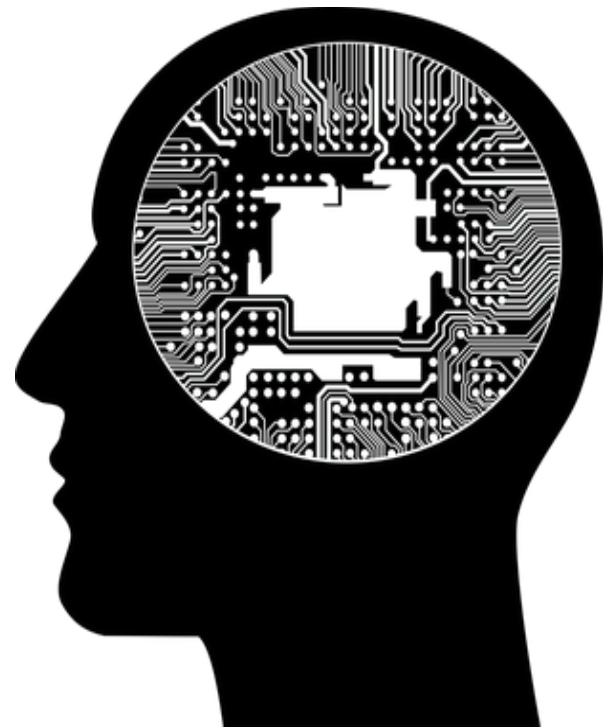


**How did gestalt psychology
impact the field of
psychology?**



How did gestalt psychology impact the field of psychology?

- In the **1920s**, gestalt psychology was popular in Germany and the USA.
- It impacted many modern psychological principles.
- It influenced the development of cognitive psychology.



How did gestalt psychology impact the field of psychology?

- However, it failed to become a major school of thought in American psychology.
 - Behaviorism was gaining popularity in the USA.
 - Gestalt psychology was too theoretical for the typical American pragmatist.
 - Many incorrectly assumed gestalt psychologists *only* studied perception.
 - Many of the founders taught in small colleges without graduate programs.