



M A RAINEY ASSOCIATES

Reframing Resistance to Change: A Gestalt Perspective

**Mary Ann Rainey
Claire Stratford**

Reframing Resistance to change: A Gestalt perspective

by Mary Ann Rainey and Claire Stratford

Zusammenfassung

Der Gestaltberater hat viele Möglichkeiten, mit Widerständen zu arbeiten: Er oder Sie können die Bewusstheit weiten, die vorhandenen Energien und die Ressourcen nutzen und seine oder ihre Präsenz einbringen. Es erscheint besonders wichtig, die positiven Aspekte des Widerstands zu betonen. Wenn Widerstand ausgeblendet wird, entsteht kein vollständiges Bild. Das mögliche Engagement widerständiger Akteure wird nicht aktiviert, und wichtige Informationen bleiben ungenutzt. Es ist besonders effektiv, die Klienten ein spezielles Dilemma unmittelbar erfahren zu lassen. Dies kann z.B. mit Rollenspielen erfolgen.

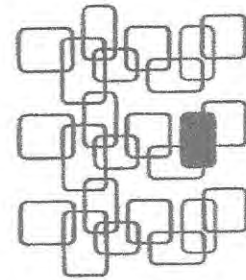
Die Untersuchung und Prüfung der Anwendbarkeit der Gestalttheorie geht weiter. Praktiker betrachten Widerstand mit einer Reihe von Vorteilen: als ein Ereignis, ein Muster, ein sonderbares Verhalten, einen Stil, eine Kontaktstörung oder eine Veränderung und Erweiterung von Kontakt. Hier sind weitere Forschungen notwendig, um nützliche Modelle und Methoden im Kontext sozialer Dynamik weiterzuentwickeln.

1. Introduction

Change is way of life in today's business environment. Executives are no longer waiting for external forces to induce change, many are initiating complex change as a strategy of growth and survival. Technological advances and globalization greeted the 21st century with both the mandate and the opportunity for unprecedented change. The ability to manage change has never been more critical to business success.

All change efforts, whether therapeutic, organizational or of a larger scale, encounter difficulty negotiating smoothly to desired outcome. Much of the challenge rests with the need that humans have to both seek and resist change. It is impossible to discuss change without engaging the topic of resistance. Yet, resistance is seldom understood. In organizations, resistance is usually portrayed as a force of opposition from disgruntled employees or an outdated part of the business. Gestalt regards resistance as a source of enormous energy that is protective, creative and often an indicator of health.

The purpose of this article is to present the Gestalt theory of resistance for working in organizations. Resistance is best understood if seen as the manifestation of multiple realities. A classic example is the difference in the objectives of the sales and engineering departments. The sales department is focused on the revenue generated by a quicker-to-market product, which is often at odds with the engineering department's desire to have more time to design the best product. The sales department's push for speed is regarded as resistant to the quality efforts of engineering. More time for engineering undermines the sales group's priority to increase the bottom line. This case clearly illustrates that resistance is often seen through the eye of the beholder. At the most basic level, resistance is defined in Gestalt terms as energy in another direction.



Change is way of life in today's business environment

In Gestalt terms resistance is defined as energy in another direction

Die Autorinnen

Mary Ann Rainey, Ph. D. ist Organisationsentwicklerin des Energieversorgers UCM in Chicago. Claire Stratford ist Beraterin in den USA.

2. Historical Underpinnings of Resistance to Change

Resistance as a concept can be traced back to the early days of psychotherapy. Freud (1927) saw resistance as defense mechanisms used by the patient to protect the ego (and reject therapy). Still, he understood the healthy necessity of resistance to help manage and cope with new stimuli. Reich (1976) focused on physical rather than mental processes as defense mechanisms. He defined »body armor« as muscular inhibitions used by the patient to constrain anger, anxiety and sexual energy. Jung (1971) believed unconsciousness was the way humans denied the underdeveloped part of their personality, which he called the »shadow«. Perls (1969) and other Gestalt psychologists (Kohler 1929; Koffka 1935; Wertheimer 1945) saw the health of an organism as directly related to the degree of contact across the boundary between the organism and its environment. Resistance, they believed, was an attempt by the organism to disturb contact in the face of perceived or real threat. This form of self-protection was seen as productive when consciously chosen by the organism.

3. Gestalt Stance on Resistance

The primary objective of a Gestalt intervention is to enhance the ability to notice energy in its many expressions and to work with it creatively. Energy forces seldom move in the same direction and are often at odds with each other. In fact, the Gestalt intervener expects to find ambivalence to change in all systems. Nevis (1987) assumes that even when people ask for help, there is some part of them that is doubtful about accepting it. He feels that the job of the intervener is to heighten awareness of the ambivalence and help the client reach some resolution of the dilemma.

Client's assessment
of the current reality

A first step in working with resistance is the client's assessment of the current reality. This particular Gestalt stance works from the basis of the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970) which states that change begins by attending to »what is« and not by directing energy toward »what might be.« During the process of exploring the present state, the client begins to learn more about what and how he/she wants to change.

Concept of polarities

Another component of the paradoxical theory of change is the concept of polarities. What it means is that for every proposed change there exists a polarity of energy that moves in the opposite direction. This is similar to the concept of yin-yang in Eastern thought. Yin-yang represents two complementary and interdependent energy sources that are in a perpetual cycle of becoming and dissolving. In harmony, yin-yang is depicted as the dark and light halves of a circle that symbolize the whole of the universe and all that is in it. Perls (1969) once said that opposites show an affinity to each other and if a position of neutrality is assumed, both sides will be revealed and what was half will become whole. The concept of »holism« is central to the Gestalt orientation. Helping the client explore both the »forces for« and the »forces against« change is one way the Gestalt practitioner brings holism to the Gestalt methodology.

Resistance is most
useful in the change
process

Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin (1951) emphasized that resistant energy is active energy. He saw people's reluctance to move toward a particular goal as a dynamic state. Resistance is most useful in the change process when considered in various ways – as an event, a pattern, a specific behavior, a style, an interruption or a modulation or enhancement to contact (see Wheeler 1988).

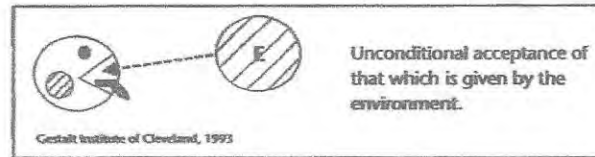
4. Gestalt Resistances at the Individual Level

The Gestalt theory of resistance identifies six major resistances: introjection, projection, desensitization, retroflexion, deflection and confluence.

Six major resistances

□ Introjection

Introjection is the most fundamental of the resistances, the one from which the others can be easily linked. Eating was a useful metaphor for Perls



Eating as a metaphor for introjection

(1969) when describing introjection. The process of eating requires biting, chewing, and digestion of food. Improper eating can result in indigestion, nausea and regurgitation. An analogy can be made between poorly assimilated food and inadequately assimilated ideas and thoughts. When an individual takes time to »digest« intellectual material, there is greater ownership of the material. An idea which is accepted without question is an introject.

Though Perls (1969) generally believed that resistance with awareness was healthy, he had one caveat and that was introjection. He felt that introjection was unhealthy under all circumstances. Gestalt today embraces all forms of resistance, including introjection, as supportive of an organism when done with intent. It is obvious that children need guidance from parents and other authority figures. Adults however must determine which childhood introjects are still useful. Overcoming the habitual behavior of introjection requires increased awareness. The individual can develop a discriminating attitude toward information from the environment, accepting those things that enable growth and development.

□ Projection

Projection is a trait, attitude, feeling or behavior that is actually a part of the personality of an individual but is not experienced and owned by the individual. The trait, feeling or behavior is attributed to another person or object »outside« of the individual. The individual experiences the trait, feeling or behavior as directed toward her by an outside source instead of the other way around.

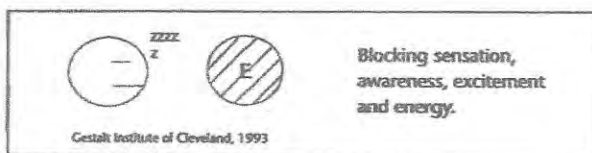


Projection can be a trait, attitude, feeling or behavior

As a form of resistance, projection limits contact with the environment. Awareness of self is minimized. It becomes useful when there is an integration of the individual into such projection. For instance, instead of always blaming siblings and parents, the individual should explore the role he plays in creating negative family dynamics.

□ Desensitization

Desensitization is especially important as a resistance style because it affects awareness, the cornerstone of Gestalt methodology (Carter 1998). Desensitization is the literal decrease in sensory perception. It involves the dullness of the senses, which includes blurred vision, hearing loss, blandness of taste,



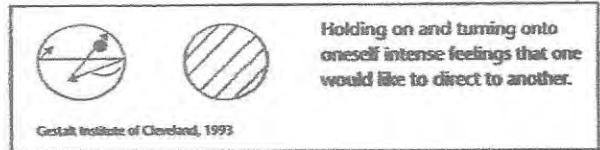
Desensitization as a resistance style

decreased feeling of touch and loss of smell. Many soldiers develop the capacity to endure the horrors of war by reducing their capacity to feel pain. Over time, this reduction of sensory function extends to a reduced range of motor functions and emotions. The key to overcoming desensitization is to increase energy and awareness.

□ **Retroflection**

Retroflection can be useful

Retroflection is commonly manifested through physical ailments, ranging from simple body tension and headaches to ulcers and chronic illness. With its impact on motor skills, retroflection can be thought of as a physical analog to desensitization.

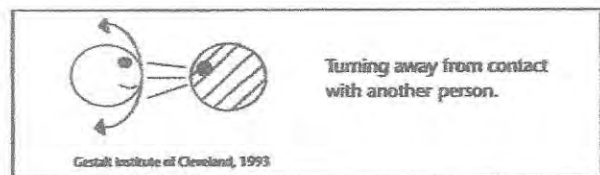


The most effective way of reversing retroflection is by redirecting energy outside the self so that the internal struggle ends. There are times when retroflection is useful. A good example of this is when people hold on to feelings of outrage and anger during a hostage crisis or other violent situations. Threat of danger is real and retroflection makes sense.

□ **Deflection**

Examples of deflection: excessive talking, constant joking and substituting mild emotions for intense expressions of feeling

Excessive talking, constant joking and substituting mild emotions for intense expressions of feeling are examples of deflection. Because the result is avoidance of contact, these behaviors are unhealthy if they represent the individual's chronic and or predominant style of interaction. When a situation is »too hot to handle«, deflection supports the individual by preventing direct contact with the environment. As a resistance, deflection is an important strategy for reducing or minimizing tension.

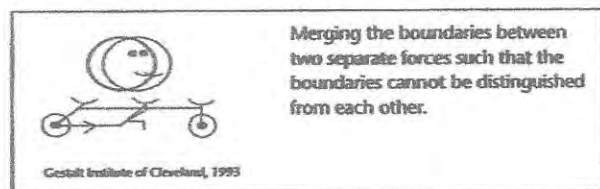


Experimenting with smaller tasks that do not require long engagement of time helps the individual for whom deflection is a problem. One can also minimize deflection by confronting situations more directly, staying focused and slowing down. Deflection is one resistance style that comes under criticism from a multicultural perspective. The avoidance of eye contact is generally regarded as deflective behavior. In some societies looking directly at another person is deemed inappropriate. Change agents must be aware of the cultural implications of applying all of the Gestalt resistances.

□ **Confluence**

Confluence can be undone by allowing differences to be acknowledged

Confluence enables one to deny differences, usually causing stress and tension. Boundaries between the individual and the environment are blurred when one is confluent. The individual loses all sense of self. The act of merging prevents one from being alone and maintains harmony. As an avoidance of conflict, confluence inhibits true contact and personal growth. Confluence can be reversed by allowing differences to be ack-



nowledged. The individual must begin to experience choices, needs and feelings that belong to self and that do not coincide with those of others.

A good illustration of the Gestalt resistances and how they are connected can be seen in the following case: Michael and his professor Helga disagree about a certain discussion topic. Even though Michael knows he can substantiate his point, he is hesitant to continue because he was taught to respect authority (*introjection*) and fears the worst (*projection*). He makes a joke (*deflection*) but Helga insists that Michael accept her perspective. He feels angry but tries not to show it and eventually complies (*confluence*). A classmate notices that Michael keeps rubbing his hand against his desk and now his hand is bleeding. Michael is unaware that he is bleeding (*desensitization*). He suddenly begins to cough violently. By holding onto his anger, he has in effect directed the anger energy onto himself (*retroflexion*). Michael is in the midst of a stand-off between mutually opposing forces within him – respect for authority and expression of anger. If Michael's behavior is habitual, it poses a problem. Table 1 summarizes the six Gestalt resistances as both avoidance of contact and as creative forces.

5. Gestalt in Organizations

Unlike working with individuals, consulting in organizations involves the consideration of a broader scope of social, political, cultural and economic dynamics. The Gestalt approach of working in organizations attempts to address this complex mix of forces by bringing together a unique blend of Gestalt theory, general systems theory and organizational behavior. Formally known as Organization and Systems Development or OSD, the model was developed in 1977 at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland by a group of Gestalt psychologists and behavioral scientists from Case Western Reserve University who wanted to expand the use of Gestalt methodology in organizations.¹

A blend of Gestalt theory, general systems theory and organizational behavior

6. General Systems Theory and Gestalt

Gestalt theory exists within the context of the numerous theoretical frameworks that were present at the time of its inception and continues to respond and adapt to emerging inquiry and thought. The twentieth century saw the gradual erosion of dependence upon Newtonian physics and the emergence of general systems theory. This represented a major shift from a linear perspective of causality to one that was rooted in a more complex view of nature and the world. Taking its cues primarily from the work of biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1988), general systems theory sought to link various scientific disciplines, both hard and soft, by using a common set of characteristics for thinking about all kinds of systems. Von Bertalanffy argued that regardless of the complexity of a system, order can be found. Rather than reducing an entity to the sum of its parts, general systems theory emphasized the relationship among the parts and their connection to the greater whole.

Gestalt theory exists within the context of the numerous theoretical frameworks

Principles of general systems theory include:

- the interactive relationship and continuous exchange of energy between an organism and its environment

¹ John Carter, Leonard Hirsh, Elaine Kepner, Carolyn Lukensmeyer and Ed Nevis began the Organization and Systems Development (OSD) Program at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (GIC) in 1977. An International OSD Program was started by GIC in 1993 with the support of the Institut für Gestaltorientierte Organisationsberatung in Germany.

- emphasis on an open system that continuously re-energizes and evolves versus a closed system that tends to deteriorate and eventually dies
- »homeostasis« and the ability of an organism to maintain a steady state
- »equifinality« and the numerous ways of arriving at a given end state
- differentiation and integration of subsystems, the dynamic interplay among them, and their interdependence

Initially, systems theory focused on principles of homeostasis. This shifted over the second half of the twentieth century to a more open-ended paradigm, a process evolutionary model, which suggested that change is constant and outcome is less predictable than was previously believed. Gestalt theory kept pace and moved from a focus of individual maintenance and stability to one of personal growth and development.

Organization seen as
an »organism«

Systems theory allows the organization to be seen as an »organism« that exists within the context of a larger, external environment. The significance of this concept is its applicability to every level of system. Every individual has an environment, so does every dyad, group, business unit and organization ... even the world. Because a continuous exchange of energy occurs across the boundary between an organism and its environment, it is impossible for any organism to remain the same over time. The environment influences all of the experiences of the organism and enhances or inhibits its growth and development. General systems theory reinforces the Gestalt principle that contact (or change) takes place at the boundary between the organism and its environment.

When Gestalt practitioners recognized the intellectual richness that thinking systemically brought to organizational consulting, they also recognized its practical usefulness as a guide to intervening at multiple levels of system. The Gestalt practitioner can design interventions for any level of system in order to mobilize the maximum amount of energy toward the achievement of desired goals.

7. Organizational Behavior and Gestalt _____

Similar to general systems theory, organizational behavior gained momentum during the second half of the twentieth century as universities created fields of study for people moving into the management of big corporations. The development of large bureaucracies and multinational organizations required expertise in managing the change that accompanied major business decisions. The seeds of the field can be found in many separate and distinct pieces of work. Different people from different countries began to look at groups and organizations from the perspective of their own social climates and cultures.

The writings of Frederick Taylor on scientific management, Max Weber's study of organizational structure, Henri Fayol's analysis of managerial work and Elton Mayo's experiments at Hawthorne all helped to set the stage for this new theory of organization (Wren 1994). While concentrating on individual behavior, Freud (1922) extended his work to groups, organizations and society and attempted to explain the bonding in a group and the significance of leadership. Mary Parker Follett (1928) relied heavily on Gestalt psychology to develop her notion of integrative unity as a way to resolve conflicts. Much of what is currently known about groups, leadership and resistance to change can be traced back to the research of Lewin (1951) and his colleagues.

The study of organizations has changed as expectations of how business is conducted have changed. Early scholars of organizational behavior studied group behavior, job satisfaction and human fulfillment. The need to make their theories more understandable and useful to managers led to the creation of the practice of organization development (OD).

The field today is defined more in managerial terms (team development) rather than behavioral terms (group dynamics). Managers want to know how to increase productivity and are less concerned about job satisfaction. Trends call for a wider application of behavioral science to other professions such as health care, law, public administration and international development. The shift is clearly toward understanding organizations within the context of a larger environment. Much of current research stems from the open systems view of organizations. The integration of Gestalt theory, general systems theory and organizational behavior provides one of the most theoretically sound and practical models for understanding and intervening in complex systems.

Understanding and intervening in complex systems

Gestalt Resistances at the Organizational Level

Many mechanisms, processes and a range of behavior can be used to avoid, regulate or modulate energy flow and contact between parts of an organization. Sometimes it is the way the organization is structured or the leadership style or the way work is organized that impacts the intensity of contact. The Gestalt practitioner holds a fundamental belief that just as individuals have to manage ambivalence to change, so do organizations. For purposes of this discussion, organization refers to the entire organization and all levels of system within the organization except the individual level, which has been discussed. Even though the manifestations are different, Gestalt resistances are at work everyday in organizations.

Gestalt resistances are at work everyday in organizations

Introjection. Every organization needs a set of values, norms and ethics to operate effectively. It is also a way of orienting newcomers to a firm. When these guides of behavior have become outmoded, yet continue to serve as the basis for the conduct of business, introjection is present. New ideas and proposals are routinely rejected or pushed aside because »that is the way we have always done it around here.« In most cases, employees maintain introjected behavior because it is rewarded. The problem is that the organization grows increasingly out-of-step with the world around it.

»That is the way we have always done it around here«

A culture audit will uncover the implicit assumptions that guide employee behavior and allow for a choice to be made about which assumptions are aligned with business goals. Most high performance cultures have a practice of clarifying expectations throughout the organization, which is helpful in preventing undesired introjects.

Projection. One of the most useful tools of strategic planning is the visioning process. Visioning is projection at the organizational level. A pattern of using »best guesses« and assumptions about financial markets, competitors, other organizations or departments is also projection but in a dysfunctional way. Projection can take the form of constant criticism or unfounded praise about almost everything that does not originate within the immediate work group. When organizations establish systems of accountability, greater ownership of behavior follows and projection is minimized.

Projection is one of the most useful tools of strategic planning

Highly active organizations must project because there is little time to scan for information about the environment. Unsuccessful mergers and acquisitions are due in large part to projection. Data gathering counteracts projection. Slowing the pace for a period of time will increase awareness.

Suffering from a lack of awareness of what is happening

Desensitization. When organizations desensitize, they suffer from a lack of awareness of what is happening around them though it may be evident to others. Scanning and assessing the environment are not included in everyday management practice. This usually happens when attention is directed toward one aspect of the firm at the expense of other equally important issues. The emergence of Japan as a major player in the auto industry in the 1970s stemmed from a lack of external scanning by US carmakers. A tradition of success had led to little interest and the desensitization to matters outside of the country. The impact was devastating.

Organizations can undo desensitization by increasing their internal and external scanning processes. Conducting surveys and benchmarking studies, attending trade shows and engaging in corporate intelligence are all ways organizations can keep pace with current business trends.

Retroreflection is associated with inaction

Retroreflection. Whereas projection is related to action, retroreflection is associated with inaction. Retroreflection describes a system that is exceedingly slow to act and holds back decisions until the last possible moment. There is anxiety about commitment to action plans. The system may require guarantees before acting, although operating without risk is impossible. By encouraging and rewarding execution, businesses overcome retroreflection. It is also useful to structure projects into small chunks of work. This way, employees are able to see results more quickly and be motivated to continue taking action.

Executing to plan is the best way to avoid deflection

Deflection. There may be difficulty staying focused until a problem is resolved or a situation is completed. Too many issues press for attention at the same time and the system jumps from one to another without resolution of any. Diversions happen constantly. This is often accompanied by frequent shifts in personnel and high turnover. Executing to plan is the best way to avoid deflection. For meetings, build an agenda or better still, hire a facilitator. During a discussion, stay on the topic until complete.

Many organizations are attracted to the latest best practice and tend to start one change initiative after another. Deflection is sometimes the issue. These efforts are labeled »flavors of the day« because employees do not have a sense of when one ends and another one begins. They are unwilling to commit. Communicating the purpose, scope and timetable for a change initiative is a suggestion for undoing this particular type of deflection.

All or nothing phenomenon

Confluence. Everything pretty much looks and feels the same in the confluent organization. It is an all or nothing phenomenon – all conflict or all harmony, all planning or all action – with little distinction in behavior pattern. Confluence can be seen in a situation where all ten executives agree to the restructuring plan, even though it is only the CEO who really wants it. It is obvious that sameness is rewarded in this organization and given greater weight than creative difference.

Clarifying boundaries is the initial step in undoing confluence. Heighten similarities and differences. Training in conflict management builds employee comfort with differentiating themselves. Managers can also create a culture and climate where diversity is valued.

Summary

The Gestalt intervener has many choices available when working with resistance at the organizational level: heighten awareness of the interplay between multiple realities, use self and personal energy to influence the interplay of dynamics (presence), take action to elevate or modulate available energy. It

is important to stress the positive aspects of resistance and focus on what is functional or dysfunctional rather than what is »good« or »bad.« Resistance is a clue to what the organization is avoiding. If the organization is unaware of resistance, it is not seeing the total picture. New practitioners are prone to make the client more aware of resistance by naming it – «deflection is present» or «you are retroflecting.» Working with resistance is more effective when the client is given the opportunity to experience the advantages and downsides of a particular dilemma. For instance, the consultant can invite a team that cannot agree about a new office site to role play how they would operate in location A and in location B. The experience will provide fresh information and learning for the group about the issue and themselves and likely shift the energy.

Inquiry and examination of the applicability of the Gestalt theory of resistance is on-going. As mentioned earlier, practitioners are increasingly considering Gestalt resistances from a wide range of vantage point: as an event, a pattern, a particular behavior, a style, an interruption to or a modulation or enhancement of contact. Such exploration is necessary in order for Gestalt theory, methodology and practice to continue to be useful in the complex world of human dynamics.

Inquiry and examination of the applicability of the Gestalt theory of resistance is on-going

Resistance	Avoidance of Contact	Creative Force
Interjection	Unconditional acceptance of things from the environment; «swallowing whole without chewing»	Learning by using others' examples; modeling successful people and mentors
Projection	Making one's awareness someone else's; blaming others	Being imaginative and creative; showing empathy
Desensitization	Blocking awareness; dulling the senses	Managing the flow of harmful information from the environment
Retroflection	Absorbing the major responsibility for conflict; turning conflict energy inside and against self	Survival to protect self; not yielding to inappropriate actions
Deflection	Pushing awareness and experience aside	Providing relief; allowing for levity; relaxing
Confluence	Losing self identity; denying differences between self and the environment	Offering support, peace and harmony

Gestalt Resistances as Avoidance of Contact and as a Creative Force

References

- Beisser, A., The paradoxical theory of change, in: Fagan, J., Sheperd, I., (Hrsg.), *Gestalt Therapy Now*, Palo Alto, CA, Science and Behavior Books 1970
- Carter, J. D., *OSD 2000: Organization and Systems Development Program 1998-2000*, Unpublished educational manuscript, Organization and Systems Development Center, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland 1998
- Follett, M. P., *Creative Experience*. London, Longmans, Green and Co. 1924
- Freud, S., *The Ego and the Id*, 1927, Translated and edited by Strachey, J., New York, Norton 1962
- Freud, S., *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 1922, Translated and edited by Strachey, J., New York, Norton 1989
- Jung, C., *Aion: Phenomenology of the Self*, in: Campbell, J., (Hrsg.), *The Portable Jung*, S. 139-162, New York, Viking, 1971, (Original work published 1921. Original translation 1923)
- Koffka, K., *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, New York, Harcourt, Brace 1935
- Kohler, W., *Gestalt Psychology*, New York, Liveright 1929
- Lewin, K., *Field Theory in Social Science*, New York, Harper 1951
- Nevis, E. C., *Organizational Consulting: A Gestalt Approach*, Cleveland, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland press, 1987, Published and Distributed by Gardner Press
- Perls, F. S., *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, New York, Random 1969
- Reich, W., *Character Analysis*, 3rd ed, Translated by Vincent R. Carfagno, New York, Pocket Books 1976
- von Bertalanffy, L., *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, and Applications*, Revised Ed, New York, Braziller 1988
- Wertheimer, M., *Productive Thinking*, New York, Harper 1945
- Wheeler, G., *Gestalt Reconsidered: A New Approach to Contact and Resistance*, Cleveland, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Press, 1988, Published and Distributed by Gardner Press
- Wren, D. A., *The Evolution of Management Thought*, 4th ed, New York, Wiley & Sons 1994