

# Origins principles and contributions of gestalt psychology essay



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Gestalt psychology was defined as the investigation of conscious experience through introspection and see things in meaning, whole intact configurations. It was first proposed by German psychologists in 1920s to explain how people organized visual information. The rise of Gestalt psychology and its contributors was emphasized, in particular the contributions of Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Kohler. This paper also highlighted key theories of Gestalt psychology and its contributions to modern psychology. Some of its contributions included brain functioning, perception, learning, and problem solving.

Gestalt is a German word that means “ configuration”, “ form”, or “ whole” (Hergenhahn). Hergenhahn (2009) defined Gestalt psychology as the investigation of conscious experience through introspection and to see things not in isolated pieces but in meaningful, intact whole configurations. Gestalt principles were first proposed by German psychologists in the 1920s to explain how people organized visual information (Palmer, 1999). It began with criticism of the structure of experience, pointed to the shortfall of sensation, and the relations between contents as a scientific explanation of experienced events (Ogden, 1933).

Max Wertheimer and his associates Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Kohler were usually considered as the founders of the Gestalt school of thought (Hergenhahn, 2009).

Prior to Wertheimer and his associates, there were others who had contributed to early development of Gestalt psychology. Immanuel Kant believed that the mind adds meaning to our conscious experience that was

activated by sensory stimulation (Hergenhahn, 2009). This was similar to theories advocated by Gestalt psychologists. Ernst Mach advocated that a wide variety of sensory stimulations could lead to the same perception which supported the view that perceptions are different from various inputs to the senses (Hergenhahn, 2009). Christian von Ehrenfels said that human perceptions contained form qualities that were not held in segregated sensations. People are able to recognise patterns in whatever way the dots are being arranged (Hergenhahn, 2009). The term “ Gestalt qualities”, was coined by Ehrenfels, to describe the emergent quality possessed by a set of stimulus to be perceived as a “ whole” rather than as a mass of varied parts (Ehfrendels, 1937).

In 1910, Max Wertheimer came up with the idea that perception was structured in different ways from sensory stimulation, and that it was different from the sensations that it was derived from. In his experiment with a tachistoscope, he found that when two light flashes at different intervals, the lights appeared to move. This suggested the human mind was generating perceptions and structures that do not correspond with sensory stimulation. He coined this movement “ phi phenomenon” (Hergenhahn, 2009). Though he was not the first to discover this phenomenon, Wertheimer saw the deeper implications and related it to a coherent system of psychological principles (Boynton & Smith, 2006). Kurt Koffka’s was the first to study form perception in his paper “ Gestalt Theorie” (Koffka, 1922), followed by two books; one on child psychology and the other on principles of Gestalt psychology. The paper and the latter book which helped laid the foundation for Gestalt psychology. Wolfgang Kohler, focused much of his

research on the nature of learning in chimpanzees and developed learning theories in relation to Gestalt psychology (Hergenhahn, 2009).

Gestalt psychology made a number of contributions to the study of psychology. One contribution is that idea of psychophysical isomorphism. Gestaltists believed that the brain contains structural fields of electrochemical forces that were present before any form of sensory stimulation. The concept stressed that force fields in the brain affected incoming sensory data and in turn affected by it. It was the transformed data that was being experienced consciously. It was stressed that patterns of perceptual and brain activity were similar and yet different. An analogy was like the map of a country and the actual geographical terrain (Hergenhahn, 2009).

Gestaltists disagreed with the concept of brain functioning as put forth by the constancy hypothesis that proposed that there was a one-to-one correspondence between environmental stimuli and sensations. They believed that sensory information interacted with the brain and caused fields of mental activity that would be experienced as perception (Hergenhahn, 2009). Gestaltists also believed organized brain activity dominated perception and not the sensory stimuli that provided input to the brain. In other words, analysis took a top-down and not a bottom-up approach. This approach was applied to a wide variety of mental activities like thinking, learning, and problem-solving (Wertheimer, 1987). The law of Prägnanz, a central theme of Gestalt psychology, asserted that all cognitive experiences would tend to be as organized, symmetrical, simple, and regular, at any

given moment. Henle (1986) suggested that psychologists broke away from nativism-empiricism dichotomies and see things in a more holistic way.

One major component of Gestalt theory was figure-ground relationship. It referred to the division of perceptual field into two parts; the figure, which was the object of attention, and the ground, consisted of everything that was not attended to. A shift in one's attention could change the way the figure or ground was perceived. Another related theory was perceptual organization. Stimuli that had continuity with one another could be perceived as a whole unit. This supported the view that brain activity organized itself into patterns according the law of Prägnanz (Hergenhahn, 2009).

Another area of contribution of Gestalt psychology was in the area of learning. In accordance with the law of Prägnanz, problems disrupted the balance in brain activity and problems would be confronted and solved to restore the state of equilibrium. Gestaltists emphasized that the learning process was through cognitive trial and error and not behavioural trial and error. They believed in the concept of transposition, that organisms learned principles or relationships and not specific responses to specific situations as advocated by behaviourists (Hergenhahn, 2009). Wertheimer (1959) advocated that learning based on understanding of the structure of the problem was easily remembered and had many advantages compared to rote learning or problem solving based on formal logic.

Critics said that many of the central ideas in Gestalt psychology were vague and difficult to prove experimentally. Nevertheless, Gestaltists made many contributions to the discipline of psychology. It also influenced the

development of cognitive psychology which included areas as memory, concept formation, attention, reasoning, and problem solving which helped psychology evolved to what it is today (Hergenhahn, 2009).