

A HISTORY OF THE KOOTENAY GESTALT COMMUNITY

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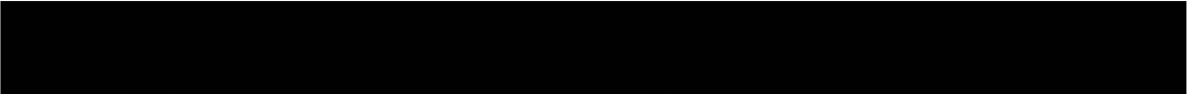
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ABSTRACT

The study is a contemporary history of a loosely-knit community which grew out of experience in Gestalt therapy groups held throughout the 1970s in the Kootenay region of British Columbia. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with community members, as well as written documents such as newsletters, diaries and personal correspondence. Data were presented in the form of an historical narrative, which addressed the following questions:


1. What were the origins of Gestalt activity in the Kootenays?
2. What services existed, and for whom?
3. How did the Gestalt community evolve?
4. What kinds of organizational structures were established and how did they function?
5. What was the relationship between the development of the counterculture in the area and the popularity of Gestalt?
6. What contributed to the decline in Gestalt activity and the fading of the community?

Historical and cultural trends were examined in relation to the community's development and some possible explanations offered to account for the widespread use of Gestalt therapy techniques and values outside of the usual therapeutic context.

  
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In January of this year, Bethal Phaigh died. She was a friend, teacher and extraordinary role model for so many of us, packing more into "retirement" than most people manage in a lifetime. In fond memory, this work is dedicated to her.

## INTRODUCTION

Out of the social and political upheaval of the 1960's emerged the phenomenon known as the counterculture, defined by Leech (1973) as "a way of life and a philosophy which at central points is in conflict with the mainstream society" (p. 8). Starting with the "hippies" (a term coined in 1965 by San Francisco Chronicle columnist Herb Caan) of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district and New York's Greenwich Village, the counterculture represented a dramatic departure from conventional North American society.

Although initially an urban phenomenon, the counterculture's influence spread as many of these young people moved away from the cities to rural areas, where they bought or leased land (often co-operatively). Berger (1981) referred to this countercultural trend as pastoralism, characterized by "simple living in harmony with nature in the country; continuities with the 'suburban ideal'; negative predispositions toward technology; pride in survival 'on the land'; pride in development of manual skills; frugality, ecological consciousness; apocalypse: impending doom for the cities" (p. 19). Many people attempted to create extended families through various group living arrangements, but most of the communes and co-operatives functioned for only a short time. However, many ex-communards stayed in rural areas as part of the more individualistic back-to-the-land movement of the 1970's

(Gardner, 1978).

This phenomenon occurred throughout North America, including British Columbia. Although Vancouver had the largest concentration, there were also many rural pockets of countercultural activity scattered throughout the province, one of which developed in the Kootenay region. The Vancouver Sun newspaper of August 2, 1971 carried an article entitled "Farm Communes Thriving in Flowery Slocan Country", which stated "the back-to-the-land movement is a thriving reality in the Slocan Valley", a relatively remote area in the West Kootenays. In addition to the Slocan Valley, people coming from urban centers in the United States and Canada settled in and around other parts of the region, including Nelson, Kaslo and Castlegar.

Zicklin (1983) noted that the counterculture "was an inchoate amalgam of persons, groups, beliefs, practices, events and symbols. There was no official membership and likewise no common credo" (p.3). However, along with other researchers, (Berger, 1981; Wieder, Foss and Larkin, 1976; Zimmerman, 1974;) he concluded that despite the lack of a unified belief system, the counterculture did embody certain identifiable themes. At the same time, he stressed that "not all who identified with the counterculture necessarily made each of [the themes] an equally vital part of their beliefs" (p.3). Certainly this lack of uniformity typified the Kootenays, where many overlapping subgroups concerned with such things as meditation, co-operative food buying and

women's issues developed.

One such subgroup, referred to in this study as the Kootenay Gestalt community, evolved out of participation in Gestalt therapy or growth groups. The Kootenay Gestalt community clearly exhibited a cohesiveness that went beyond random participation in privately-run growth groups, however the term community is not used in the sense of a commune or intentional community based on shared ownership of a piece of land. Rather, it is meant in a broader sense, as "a sharing or participation, identity or likeness, community of interest" (Funk and Wagnall, 1958); a psychological sense of community resulting from participation in Gestalt groups, as well as the application of Gestalt principles and terminology in "real life".

The purpose of this study was to trace the history of this unique community from its beginnings in the early 1970's to the present.

#### Statement of the Problem

As a source of counselling and as a community network, the Gestalt community affected many people in the region, but the lack of formal organization and documentation made it virtually invisible to all but those people directly involved. Although the study was initially conceived as a follow-up on the effects of participation in Gestalt groups in the Kootenays, it seemed more appropriate to thoroughly describe the evolution and character of Gestalt usage in the

area, leaving consideration of possible long-term effects to future research. The study addressed the following questions:

1. What were the origins of Gestalt activity in the Kootenays?
2. What services existed, and for whom?
3. How did the Gestalt community evolve?
4. What kinds of organizational structures were established and how did they function?
5. What was the relationship between the development of the counterculture in the area and the popularity of Gestalt?
6. What contributed to the decline in Gestalt activity and the fading of the community?

#### Significance of the Study

In a review of small group methods of personal change, Hartman (1979) noted the proliferation of group change techniques. Recognizing that "there are sensitivity training, encounter, self-analytic, leaderless, experiential and self-help group methods being used to change people in classrooms, businesses, churches and living rooms" (p.454), he urged researchers to broaden their scope by investigating those group methods not confined to formal psychotherapeutic settings. Lieberman and Bond (1976) concluded that the methodology of psychotherapeutic research may not

necessarily be applicable to self-help groups, due to such problems as difficulties in using controls and a lack of clear termination criteria.

The present study can be considered to have both substantive and methodological significance. First, it provides information on a subcultural milieu not generally accessible to professionals. Examination of this type of "de facto" counselling service may provide insight into ways in which diverse populations could be better served, especially in regard to the use of Gestalt therapy. Second, it examines the application of therapy techniques and principles in a broader community context, taking into account the influence of the social and political climate of the times. An understanding of the implications of the use of various powerful group techniques is important, since such usage is often accompanied by ill-defined or poorly understood assumptions and beliefs. Finally, the exhortation from some members of the helping professions to pursue therapy as a way of life (Carkhuff and Berenson, 1977; Hart, Corriere and Binder, 1975), would seem to call for a serious inquiry into any effort to do so. In using the methodology of historical research, this study provides information on the applicability of such methods to the field of counselling psychology.

#### Delimitations

This study reports as accurately as possible the

chronology and spirit of the Kootenay Gestalt community, focusing on themes as well as specific events. It was not designed to survey the experiences of all who were a part of the community, and there was no attempt to analyze data statistically. As history, the study reports and interprets, but no attempt is made to evaluate the effectiveness of Gestalt as a therapy, nor to generalize from the Kootenay experience to other counterculture groups.

#### Limitations

Since no case histories were taken and no formal records kept (other than for scheduling groups and organizing the land development), the bulk of the information gathered for the study was obtained through interviews with people involved in the community. The most obvious limitation of oral history is the problem of hazy or selective memory. Whenever possible, information was gleaned from multiple sources and checked against available documentation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As with any community, the Kootenay Gestalt community's development occurred in response to a variety of interrelated factors, and cannot be considered in isolation from the times in which it flourished. This review describes three major overlapping forces, which developed during the post-World War II era and gained prominence in the 1960s: the counterculture, the human potential movement and the self-help movement. An examination of some of the descriptive and historical literature from these three areas will, hopefully, provide a sense of the zeitgeist which contributed to the community's emergence.

## Counterculture

As Berger (1967) pointed out, the counterculture was an outgrowth of a Bohemian tradition stretching back over decades, its most recent predecessor being the "beat generation" of the 1950s. Unlike its predecessors, the counterculture became a mass-movement composed primarily of young, middle-class people.

The field of sociology is the source of most literature on the counterculture, and studies (primarily ethnographic in design) tend to focus on explaining who made up the counterculture and what it represented. (Yablonski, 1968; Wieder & Zimmerman, 1974; Gardner, 1978; Zablocki, 1980; Berger, 1981; Zicklin, 1983). The Kootenay Gestalt

community was a part of the larger countercultural community of the region, which in turn was part of the larger movement occurring throughout North America. This literature presents a general picture of the people who came to the Kootenays in the late sixties and early seventies to get "back to the land".

Weider and Zimmerman (1974) gathered ethnographic and survey data to compile a set of traits they considered to be typical of "freaks" (their term), all of whom were residents of Isla Vista, California. The study was conducted in two parts; the first consisted of partially structured interviews, intensive seminars, week-long diaries and participant observation, to provide information on participants' activities and attitudes. A survey was then done to verify the ethnographic findings. The survey, based on a probability sample of household units in Isla Vista, resulted in 450 completed questionnaires (a response rate of 83%). The researchers listed the following traits:

1. value "naturalness" - nudity, no make-up, etc.
2. very likely to have used marijuana and/or psychedelics
3. extremely liberal sexual attitudes and behaviors
4. value spontaneity and freedom
5. hostility toward and alienation from American society
6. emphasis on direct, simple gratification over indirect, complex gratification

## 7. rejection of idea of pleasure of possession (p.156)

The researchers offered as a major reason for the development of the counterculture the economic and structural changes in western society since World War II. Most notable of these changes was the affluence that allowed a whole generation to become consumers and, thus, experience an unprecedented degree of independence before becoming producers.

Much of the research on the counterculture was conducted in communes, since they were relatively stable and therefore researchable. Gardner (1978) studied 13 rural communes, which he considered representative of rural communes in general. In 1970, he visited each of the communes and attempted to reconstruct each group's history. In addition, he completed a detailed profile of the group's organizational structure and recorded his experiences as participant observer. Three years later he returned to see how each group had fared. Gardner discussed the success or failure of the communes in terms of the work of Rosabeth Kanter (1972), who developed a theory of communal commitment to account for the successes and failures of nineteenth century communes:

Kanter's central thesis was that the success or failure of communal groups over the years is a function of commitment, which can be measured in terms of organizational structures that either promote commitment or weaken it. In general, her study of thirty-one American utopias founded between 1780 and 1860 demonstrated very persuasively that her theory was true. (p. 21)

A major difference between Kanter's and Gardner's work is that the former was based on historical documentation, whereas Gardner was able to gather his data through personal contact and observation. Also, Kanter analyzed the success or failure of communes over the span of a generation (25 years), and Gardner's sample consisted of communities which had existed for less than a decade.

Upon his return, Gardner found that seven of the thirteen communes had not survived.

Looking only at the period 1970-1973, it is possible to say, with several qualifications and reservations, that this hypothesis [that groups employing more commitment inducing structural features would be more likely to survive than groups not employing such mechanisms] tended to be true of modern communes as well as those of the nineteenth century. (p. 218)

But he also found that

In the prosperous early years of the movement, the most successful communes were the more open and unstructured ones, contrary to the theory of commitment. In the harder times following 1970, however, it became apparent that the more rigorously organized groups were more likely to survive in the long run. (p. 219)

He stressed the need to take historical context into account in such an analysis, noting that the affluence and educational opportunities of the post-World War II generation (which made social experimentation much more likely than in the nineteenth century) affected people's reasons for joining and staying in communes.

In Gardner's view, the fact that most communes in North America failed to survive is less important than the fact that many of their members remained in rural areas. He

asserts that the early 1970s marked a period of high mortality for communes, and that although only a small number of people were actually involved directly, they appear to have spearheaded the back-to-the-land movement.

Berger (1981) and Zicklin (1983) also gathered data on the counterculture through contact with communes, and both described characteristic themes. Zicklin studied twenty communes between 1968 and 1971, and identified four main themes common to the counterculture:

1. new naturalism - a).environmental purity b).size and scale of industrial society c).trancendence of artificial relations
2. spiritual quest - a).the unity of nature b).the enlightened being c).spiritual and scientific breakthroughs (legitimization of psychic studies, etc.)
3. expressive mode (the opposite of uptight) - a). opening up; the encounter group and drugs b).value of spontaneity
4. movement for a new America (read "society") - a).political optimism b).the ideal of peace, as seen in the anti-war movement and "flower power" c).ideal of equality d).ideal of freedom

Berger's (1981) ethnographic study of a rural California commune, initially intended to study attitudes and practices in communal child-rearing, was expanded to include an examination of the beliefs guiding various other aspects of communal life as well. The goal was "to take some basic beliefs of the counterculture, as they were (and are) expressed in the commune movement, and to show empirically how these ideas fared when attempts were made to

create a community that lived by them" (p.18). Although he described the study in terms of ideology, he also acknowledged that the "ideology" of the counterculture was not a clearly defined system, that "the beliefs treated here are relatively specific norms rather than entire moral philosophies" (p.168).

The study focused on three sets of ideas which stood out as central to the ideology of the commune/counterculture movement:

1. The decline of age-grading; the equality of children and adults; the natural child; devaluation of "grown-ups"; early maturity of the young; the "inclusion- disattention" pattern; children as small persons, etc.
2. Pastoralism; simple living in harmony with nature in the country; continuities with the "suburban ideal"; negative pre-dispositions toward technology; pride in survival "on the land"; pride in development of manual skills; frugality, ecological consciousness; apocolypse, impending doom for the cities.
3. Intimacy; coupling and uncoupling and recoupling; sex; group marriage; negative attitudes toward the fixing of differentiated roles; "out- frontness"; emotional candor; non-possessiveness; bisexuality; feminism; serial monogamy; the "burning out" of sexual jealousy. (p 16-17)

The theoretical framework of the study was drawn from the sociology of knowledge, which "deals with the relationship of ideas to the social contexts in which they are imbedded" (p.12). Unlike the usual "macro" ideologies (doctrines such as Calvinism or liberalism), which are seen in relation to "macro" social structures (such as feudal, capitalist, etc.), Berger concerned himself "empirically

with the relationship of the small moral ideas of communards to the small social structures of communes" (p. 13), through what he calls the microsociology of knowledge. The study focused on those processes employed by communards to resolve the tensions arising from discrepancies between beliefs and day to day living. Such processes Berger called remedial ideological work, a concept very similar to Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, "aimed at bridging gaps, sweetening dissonances and restoring (perhaps only temporarily) a measure of harmony and consistency" (p.114) .

According to Berger, ideological work is necessary:

when beliefs do not seem to be very effective in serving the interests of believers (from their own point of view) or when routine behavior is in apparent contradiction with professed belief; tensions are added to that relationship [between ideas and practice] that constrain people to resolve or reduce them by some alteration in their ideas or their circumstances or both, despite the general reluctance of people to give up either their ideas or their interests, and despite the obstacles to altering their actual circumstances. (p. 16)

The process of remedial ideological work is on-going, since

reified or abstract ideas are by themselves a generally poor guide to the resolution or reduction of those tensions, because such ideas usually turn out so sufficiently contingent as to require interpretation to be applied in specific situations. (p.16)

An example of this process involved a conflict in one commune regarding the use of chainsaws in gathering wood for the winter, which was resolved through a process of re-definition. As "technology", chainsaws were viewed as undesirable, but their efficiency prompted some members to advocate their use. After much discussion it was decided

that chainsaws were "tools", not "technology", and as such were "okay".

An important component of ideological work is what Berger referred to as feeling work, an idea borrowed from Hochschild (1979) regarding the relationship of feelings to circumstances, behavior and beliefs. For example, in the commune Berger studied, the idea of "burning out" sexual jealousy was encountered quite often, since a basic tenet of the community demanded openness in sexual relationships. To maintain harmony in the event that one's partner became interested in another commune member, it was important for the "wronged" party to do something about- "burn out"- any jealous feelings he or she might have. In such a situation, rather than alter beliefs or circumstances (assuming the person wished to remain in the community, and on good terms), feeling work provided a means for diffusing tensions which might otherwise destroy the community. According to Hochschild,

Rules for managing feelings are implicit in any ideological stance; they are the 'bottom side' of ideology...Part of what we refer to as the psychological effect of rapid social change or unrest is a change in the relation of feeling rule to feeling, and a lack of clarity about what the rule actually is, owing to conflicts and contradictions between contending sets of rules. (p.567)

Despite the differences in perspective between counselling and sociological theory, the concepts of ideological work and feeling work can be useful in an exploration of the relationship, noted by Melville (1972),

between the counterculture and the innovative psychotherapies of the sixties and seventies. In Melville's view, the counterculture was/is most characterized by

its sensitivity to alienation of any sort, [resulting in] a thirst among the young for genuine encounter in any form...[and] judging from sheer proliferation, sensitivity training groups appear to be the most widespread manifestation of this thirst for encounter. The norms of these groups set the tone for the preferred interpersonal style of the whole counterculture: The chief villainies are uptightness, cerebration, game-playing and a lack of spontaneity.

That a community would form as a result of shared experiences and beliefs is not extraordinary, since such is the basis of all social, political and religious movements. That the common bond would be a form of therapy is curious, given the generally narrow focus of that process. The concepts of ideological work and feeling work can offer some insight into the uses of therapy "outside the office". In a later chapter, these concepts will form the basis of an analysis of the function Gestalt served beyond the usual goals of counselling and therapy.

#### Human Potential Movement

At the same time that the counterculture was challenging traditional societal values, the growth of the human potential movement posed a similar challenge to accepted practices and assumptions in the fields of counselling and psychotherapy. The "inchoate amalgam" that was the counterculture was also reflected in the human

potential movement, as expressed by Mann (1979) in the following:

Human potential is a global term that reflects a common conviction among a highly diverse group of practitioners that the average human being uses a very small part of his capabilities. They further agree that an extraordinarily broad spectrum of approaches, methods and techniques exist for releasing this potential. Collectively, these practitioners and methods constitute what has come to be known as the human potential movement. (p.500)

Maslow (1954,1968) is generally cited as the major theoretical influence on the movement, with his work on "peak experiences" and the inclusion of "self-actualizing needs" in his hierarchy of human needs. According to Maslow, all human beings possess an innate striving or tendency to become self-actualizing; that is, to fulfill their potential. Maslow was also the first to identify the "third force" (humanistic psychology), which became the basis for the broader human potential movement.

In terms of practice, several streams developed more or less simultaneously, setting the stage for the profusion of approaches coming under the human potential umbrella. Back (1972) and Mann both note the contribution of Moreno, the originator of psychodrama. Psychodrama stresses the here-and-now, spontaneity, trying out different roles, expressive behavior and the importance of feelings and empathy. The group format is an integral part of psychodrama, and Moreno asserted that it was the cornerstone of all later group approaches (Yablonsky, 1976).

Sensitivity or T-groups, developed for the most part by associates of Kurt Lewin, were also a major contribution. Wood (1974) states that "from this grew the multitude of workshops, laboratories, training programs, books and tapes, which in the intervening decades have promoted the work on feed-back, group confrontation, encounter and process analysis" (p.44). At the same time, Carl Rogers was developing his approach to groups and individual counselling, which emphasized feeling, empathic understanding and "person-centeredness" (Meador & Rogers, 1979).

Esalen, the prototypical growth center, was established in 1962. Mann notes that its development was directly related to that of the human potential movement, in that it was a milieu which encouraged innovation and variety in group work. Originally, the major emphasis of the group work done at Esalen was psychological, but in the seventies it shifted to include spiritual approaches such as yoga, meditation and the like, a trend echoed in the Kootenays.

Fritz Perls and Gestalt therapy played an important part in the development of Esalen. Although Perls and his colleagues began publishing in the early 1950's, it was during the time of Perls' affiliation with Esalen that the approach began to attract attention. Ironically, it was Perls who warned of "the 'turner-onners' - the quacks and the con men who think if you get some breakthrough you are cured" (Perls 1969, p. 1), foreshadowing concerns which

have been expressed about the tone of the human potential movement in general.

The human potential movement represented a shift from a restricted use of powerful group techniques in psychiatric settings to a broader application of these techniques in groups with a personal growth orientation. The Kootenay Gestalt community was a small rural manifestation of that trend, its development proceeding in a much more "grass-roots" manner than it's more structured and hierarchical urban counterparts.

#### Self-help

Although not a declared self-help organization as such, the Gestalt community provided services similar to those offered by groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or Synanon, in that, over time, members of the community took increasing responsibility for their own "treatment". In their review of the history of self-help groups in western society, Katz and Bender (1976) offered the following definition of the self-help phenomenon:

Self-help groups are voluntary, small group structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment of a special purpose. They are usually formed by peers who have come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common handicap of life-disrupting problem, and bringing about desired social and/or personal change. The initiators and members of such groups perceive that their needs are not, or cannot be, met by or through existing social institutions. Self-help groups emphasize face-to-face social interactions and the assumption of personal

responsibility by members. They often provide material assistance, as well as emotional support; they are frequently "cause"-oriented, and promulgate an ideology or values through which members may attain an enhanced sense of personal identity. (p.278)

They noted that although organized mutual aid has always existed in some form, the types of self-help groups prevalent today began to appear after World War II.

Initially, such groups were organized around various conditions such as muscular dystrophy, alcoholism and mental illness. A directory compiled in 1963 listed 265 organizations, but as the sixties progressed, the types of issues addressed by self-help groups expanded considerably, to include the concerns of welfare recipients, divorced parents and rape victims, to mention only a few. The authors asserted that "more than ever, [it is] possible to speak of the emergence of a unique phenomenon - a broad, exceedingly varied self-help movement spanning North America and Western Europe" (p.278). They estimated that several hundred thousand self-help groups may have existed in the United States by the mid-seventies.

Several researchers have devised taxonomies of self-help groups (Hurvitz, 1974; Katz and Bender, 1976; Levy, 1976). Categories of functions include such dimensions as degree of social advocacy, support during crisis times, and behavioral control. One category type, mentioned by several authors (though given different names) and relevant to the Gestalt community, describes groups with a non-problem specific, personal growth orientation.

Levy (1976) divided groups into four categories. One of these included groups

made up of members who share a common goal of personal growth, self-actualization and enhanced effectiveness in living and loving...[and also] informal, experientially oriented groups which have borrowed in varying degrees from techniques of Gestalt therapy, T-groups and sensitivity groups. (p.313)

Katz and Bender (1976) listed five types of groups, one of which included "groups that are primarily focused on self-fulfillment or personal growth. These are often referred to by themselves or others as therapeutic"(p. 279).

Hurvitz (1974) identified seven kinds of self-help organizations or programs, one of which caters to

primarily well educated middle and upper-middle class members...looking for new experiences rather than for help with distressing psychological problems in 'leaderless encounter groups' in 'growth settings'. These programs...stress openness, identity, self-actualization, transcendental experience, sensory awakening, consciousness expansion, meditation and similar experiences [which] are presented by psychotherapists of various professional backgrounds. (p. 87)

Hurvitz questioned whether participants could make good use of the attitudes and methods learned in such settings, disdainfully referring to them as "play therapy for adults".

Researchers differ in regard to which encounter-style groups they would classify as self-help, but there is general agreement that many groups exist which provide services previously provided exclusively by professional psychotherapists.

Our society provides a multitude of mechanisms for alleviating psychological suffering and increasing life satisfaction. Until recently, those overwrought by mental stress were largely viewed as "ill" -

patients to be cured by trained professionals... however, an accelerating number of developments in the mental health field - a new emphasis on humanistic and egalitarian values, the redefinition of the nature and cause of psychological problems, the disillusionment with professionalism - have caused many to challenge traditional assumptions about the nature psychological problems and how an improved condition may be brought about. (Lieberman and Bond, 1976, p.364)

This review has focused on three broad, overlapping movements prominent during the era in which the Kootenay Gestalt community developed. The counterculture challenged many basic assumptions underlying North American society, including those related to obtaining help with personal problems. The human potential movement offered, in the form of Gestalt therapy, a vehicle for working on the issues arising from the pursuit of a novel way of life, one that emphasized the openness, spontaneity and expressiveness valued by the counterculture. Finally, the self-help movement provided a model for successfully operating groups with leadership roles filled by non-experts. Although not established formally as a self-help organization, in essence the Gestalt community was an unofficial self-help group of sorts for growth-oriented rural hippies, and exhibited the self-reliant, non-professional orientation characteristic of "straight" groups.

## METHOD

## Subjects

To avoid being overwhelmed with material, formal interviews were limited to certain "key" people. These were people involved in the administration of the community's affairs (group scheduling co-ordinator, caretaker, bookkeeper), group leaders, or others whose accounts seemed necessary for a balanced presentation (e.g., someone with extensive group experience spanning several years, or whose experience differed from the majority's). To an extent, subjects were also determined by accessibility. As might be expected, some people had moved away from the area, and this researcher's limited financial resources restricted inquiry to the Kootenays and Lower Mainland.

The following people were interviewed:

Bethal Phaigh- Gestalt group leader who initiated Gestalt activity in the area.

Celeste- Co-ordinator for scheduling and disseminating information regarding groups and other activities from approximately 1976 through 1981.

Dan- Attended many groups.

Diana- Attended many groups, brief experience as co-leader.

Don Babcock- Trained as a Gestalt therapist at Cowichan, visited the Kootenays frequently to lead groups.

Jane- Co-led many groups with Bethal and others for three or four years, specialized in women's groups.

Johnny- Involved in Gestalt briefly in the early seventies, some of first groups held in his house.

Joyce Routenberg- Group leader in Vancouver, travelled frequently to the Kootenays with Bethal.

Linda- Took over role of co-ordinator from Celeste.

Louisa- One of original members of the Harmony Gates commune in Perry Siding, attended the first Gestalt group held in the Slocan Valley.

Marcia- Original owner of the crown land donated to community.

Saul- Attended many groups in Vancouver and the Kootenays, extensively involved in overseeing work on the Gestalt land.

#### Procedure

In his text on research methods in education, Good (1972) states that "viewed as research, history may be defined as an integrated narrative or description of past events or facts, written in the spirit of critical inquiry..." (p.145). Further, "history differs in method from the natural sciences, since it is not a discipline of direct observation or experimentation, but utilizes reports of observations that cannot be repeated..." (p.147) In Good's view, there are three major steps in carrying out historical research; collection of data, criticism of data and presentation of facts in a readable narrative form. This study, which examined recent history and was based primarily

on oral reports, differed in emphasis from treatments of more distant information gleaned solely from documents and relics; however, the stages of collection, criticism and presentation still guided the research process.

In describing the way in which this research proceeded, it would seem appropriate to give some background regarding my involvement with the Gestalt community. My husband and I were among the many young people who went "back to the land" in the Kootenays during the 1960s and 70s. We lived in Nelson for five years, from 1974-1979, and were active in the Gestalt community for most of that time. I was a participant, but hesitate to use the term "participant-observer", since it implies an ethnographic approach based on systematic recording of observations which I did not employ during my time in the community. This project was not conceived until after I left the area, which accounts for it's historical rather than ethnographic nature.

Certain advantages and disadvantages resulted from my relationship to the community. One advantage was in knowing that the community existed in the first place. Helping networks often exist outside professional circles, but it is difficult to learn about ones which are not organized around specific syndromes and not highly visible. A second advantage was in knowing where to go and whom to talk to; I did not have to rely on informants to tell me who was important, or to make introductions. Thirdly, the most

important advantage was the fact that to the people I contacted, I was not an outsider. As a result, interviewees were quite relaxed about discussing their experiences, and my familiarity with different aspects of the community gave me a sort of "headstart" not available to someone starting from scratch. The most obvious disadvantage was that my position as an insider might be seen as a threat to the objectivity of the study. My own observations (unrecorded though they were) did add to the general pool of information on which the study was based; however, the point of this paper was not to disguise a personal memoir as research. Rather, my goal was to record the history of the Gestalt community using my perceptions as a point of departure, but not as the sole or even major source of information.

Data collection. Most of the data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with selected members of the community. The majority of these interviews were conducted in the Nelson and Slocan Valley areas of the Kootenays over a three week period in 1983. The remaining interviews were conducted in Vancouver and Victoria through early 1985. Before travelling to the Kootenays, I drew up a list of potential interviewees. In addition, during interviews I asked people if they could think of anyone else I should talk to. Arrangements for interviews were made by telephone, either in advance or upon my arrival in the

Kootenays. It was decided to forgo the use of a cover letter, since most of the interviewees either knew me already or were acquainted with several other people who did.

Interviews were recorded on audio tapes and conducted according to guidelines suggested by the Oral History Section of the British Columbia Archives, which included:

1. Informing interviewees of the purpose of the interviews and assuring them that if at the end of the interview they were uncomfortable with anything that had been said, it could be deleted (no one took advantage of that option).

2. Obtaining interviewees' consent to quote them and asking whether they wished their names to be used.

3. Writing a detailed summary of each tape ( as opposed to a verbatim transcript).

Since the goal of the interviewing process was to piece together a series of events in which interviewees with differing roles and experience participated, a semi-structured format was employed. Although certain core questions were asked of everyone, it was necessary to "customize" interviews, both in advance and in process to suit the position or knowledge of the person being interviewed. For example, a visiting therapist who had never lived in the area would have experiences different from one who had; a participant who never led groups but who

did serve in some administrative capacity (e.g., bookkeeper), would have a different perspective from someone who became a group leader but who knew nothing of administrative matters. In addition to its "customizing" qualities, the semi-structured approach allowed me to follow-up unsolicited but relevant information which presented itself in the course of an interview.

The following is a list of questions which served as a loose framework for the interviews:

1. When and why did you first come to the Kootenays?
2. When and how did you first become involved in Gestalt?
3. What was the extent of your involvement in the community? (number of groups attended, role, types of non-therapy activities, etc.)
4. Describe "typical" group.
5. Were there ways in which use of Gestalt extended beyond the confines of groups? Describe.
6. In retrospect, how do you view your Gestalt experiences ?
7. Is there anything I haven't asked about which you think is important to include?

In addition to the interviews, relevant written material pertaining to the community was gathered. Many of the "key" people who were interviewed had various papers in their possession, since there was no central office or file in which to store them. These included personal material

(such as diaries and correspondence), as well as newsletters, posters, and some organizational records. I also searched (unsuccessfully) through the Nelson Daily News for references to Gestalt community activities.

Criticism of data. This process determines the authenticity and reliability of sources. Authenticity presented no real problem, since unlike much historical material, oral material (assuming it's gathered by the person conducting the study) automatically qualifies. To provide for maximum reliability in the oral reports, several versions of any event or class of events were solicited. All interviews were conducted with one interviewee at a time, and without reference to what others had said, in order to minimize bias based on social considerations. Written material was easily cross-checked with people in the community. The most difficult things to check were dates; more often than not, the community newsletters and records of meetings were undated, and people were often unable to give more than an approximate idea of when things took place. It was therefore necessary to do a certain amount of detective work in discerning clues from dated material and applying them to the undated material.

Narrative organization. To plan the narrative, I first went through all the interview summaries and wrote a tentative outline of the "story" of the Gestalt community.

Although not organized in an obviously chronological order, in fact the time sequence was the basis for the thematic organization. I started with historical background on the Kootenay region, followed by origins, rise and fall of the Gestalt community as a logical progression. Themes arose from this progression, which tied-in with the research questions. For example, I discussed the practice of Gestalt in the Kootenays before the development of a sense of community, since it was the therapy experience that led ultimately to the existence of that particular community. However, some of the topics covered in the "therapy" chapter (such as therapist training) did not enter into the picture until the community was well established.

I chose to use the first person for much of the writing, although the odd passive construction was occasionally used. I see no particular virtue in what Bennett Berger calls "the presentation of findings with no visible, sentient finder", and do not believe that such a style necessarily makes what I say any more or less worthwhile.

## BACKGROUND

## The Area

The geographic area under discussion is popularly known as the West Kootenays, but in fact there is no such official designation. The region is simply the Kootenay, divided differently for administrative purposes by various governmental agencies. On the east, the region is bordered by the province of Alberta, on the south by the United States. The western and northern borders roughly follow an imaginary line from Rossland to Revelstoke (south to north), and then from Revelstoke over to Golden (west to east).

Originally inhabited by scattered bands of the Kootenay tribe, the region was first noted by white explorers at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Development did not occur until the second half of that century, and resulted from two separate mining booms. The first, occurring between 1858 and 1865, followed the discovery of gold in the Wild Horse Creek area, near present day Fort Steele. The second occurred in the 1880s, which marked the beginnings of many West Kootenay towns, including Nelson, Kaslo, Sandon, Ainsworth and New Denver. In addition to mining, timber and agriculture have also contributed to the area's development. For awhile, much of the land surrounding Kootenay Lake was devoted to fruit farming, which was eventually curtailed by a blight. Today the West Kootenay still has a decidedly

rural look and feel.

### The People

Most of the original non-native settlers in the Kootenays were Americans, and American investors were the major source of funding. One historian describes the first settlers in Nelson as "Americans who mailed their letters with United States postage stamps and drank themselves into a stupor every July fourth" (Spritzer, 1979). In fact, this "Americanization" so alarmed Canadian officials that the Dewdney Trail was commissioned to provide a link between the area and the coastal cities. With construction of the trail and the railroads came other ethnic groups, among them many Chinese. In 1908, another group of immigrants arrived who were a major influence in the area, the Doukhobors.

The Doukhobors came to Canada from Russia at the turn of the century, settling first in Saskatchewan. After a dispute with the government of Saskatchewan, many decided to relocate in British Columbia. Their decision to leave Russia stemmed from conflicts between the Czarist regime and the Doukhobor's religious beliefs. These beliefs included a communal way of life and a deep-seated pacifism, the latter resulting in a fierce resistance to government officials which carried over into their lives in Canada. Some of the large red brick buildings built by the Doukhobors (which housed from thirty to fifty people), are still standing, although the communal households eventually dispersed.

In 1942, another major ethnic influx occurred when the Canadian government forcibly re-located persons of Japanese descent from the West Coast to the interior of B.C. Many ended up in Sandon, New Denver, Kaslo and Slocan City, considered ghost towns by then. Ironically, this tragedy for the Japanese became the basis for an upswing in the fortunes of the towns; buildings were restored, gardens were planted and the area generally improved by these displaced Canadians.

During the 1970s, the most recent group arrived in the Kootenays. This time, the influx was part immigration and part Canadian version of a larger social phenomenon happening all over North America and in parts of Europe. The "hippies" settled in many parts of the Kootenays, but most notably in the Slocan Valley. In some ways, their arrival echoed previous settlements. Many, though by no means all, were Americans who came to avoid the draft or to escape the social and political turmoil of late sixties' America. Like the Doukhobors, these people were inclined toward communal living, pacifism and mistrust of government agencies, and many of the homesteads they farmed were purchased from Doukhobors, who were also likely to be neighbors. However, relations between the two groups were often stormy, as cultural differences tended to outweigh philosophical similarities.

## Fritz Perls and Gestalt Therapy

Although it's doubtful that Fritz Perls ever heard of the Kootenays, his work had a profound impact on some residents of the area via several of his trainees. For this reason, it seems appropriate to briefly outline Perls' work, as well as some of the guiding principles of Gestalt therapy.

Gestalt therapy. The word Gestalt is German and not easily translated, the closest equivalent being whole or configuration. The oft-repeated phrase "the whole is greater than the sum of it's parts" is frequently employed as an explanation. Operationally, the word does little to describe the therapy; even Perls' colleagues and co-authors of the book Gestalt Therapy thought the name too esoteric. It does relate to the holistic orientation of Gestalt, which Simkin (1976) describes as the theory that "man is a total organism functioning as a whole rather than an entity split into dichotomies such as mind and body" (p.226). The concepts borrowed from Gestalt psychology such as "figure/ground, the emergent and ever-changing gestalt, the unfinished gestalt" (Kogan 1973, p.240), Perls incorporated into the notion of organismic self-regulation, which is central to the understanding of the use of various Gestalt therapy techniques. Human experience is viewed as a continual ebb and flow of various "gestalten", configurations of images, feelings and biological drives,

which vie for our attention. Perls described the phenomenon in the following way:

... the organism (is) a system that is in balance and that has to function properly. Any imbalance is experienced as a need to correct this imbalance. Now, practically, we have hundreds of unfinished situations in us. How come that we are not completely confused and want to go out in all directions? ...from the survival point of view, the most urgent situation becomes the controller, the director, and takes over. The most urgent situation emerges... The anarchy which is usually feared by the controllers is not an anarchy which is without meaning. On the contrary, it means the organism is left alone to take care of itself, without being meddled with from outside. And I believe that this is the great thing to understand: that awareness per se - by and of itself - can be curative. Because with full awareness you become aware of this organismic self-regulation, you can let the organism take over without interfering, without interrupting; we can rely on the wisdom of the organism. And the contrast to this is the whole pathology of self-manipulation, environmental control, and so on, that interferes with this subtle organismic self-control. (Perls, 1969 p.17)

The essence of Gestalt therapy, then, is awareness and acceptance. In practical terms this means that the Gestalt therapist continually encourages the client to focus on the present, the "here and now", whether working on a dream, a relationship problem or whatever. Even when discussing past events, for instance a conflict with a parent, the emphasis is on becoming aware of feelings right now. This is accomplished by speaking as if talking to the absent person in the present tense, instead of "talking about". "I'm angry at you Mom", as opposed to "I'm angry with my mother". In this way, awareness is experienced directly. This differs, in the Gestalt view, from insight, which may arrive at the

same conclusions based on the same content (I'm angry ), but lacks the "curative" properties of directly experiencing.

Through full awareness and acceptance of one's experience, it is possible to regain control, paradoxically, through relinquishing control; by trusting the organism to sort and choose the best path. Simkin (1976) sums up the leap of faith which forms the basis of all Gestalt practice: "I trust that if I fully experience what I do and how I behave, I will successfully finish (complete) a particular bit of behavior and learn from this experience. The crux is how I learn. Do I learn by fully experiencing organismically (sensing and feeling as well as judging), or must I restrict my experience to "thinking about"?". (p.230).

Although many exercises in "directed awareness" are available to a Gestalt therapist, there are a few which are fairly standard. One is the two-chair technique, in which the client alternates between two chairs and maintains both sides of a dialogue. While in one seat, clients speak as themselves and address the person they have "put" in the other chair. When in the other seat, they speak as they imagine the other person would. The other person might be someone from the past, or a spouse, or the boss; anyone with whom the client has "unfinished business". Or the two chairs might represent two aspects of the client's personality, typified by the pair Perls called Top Dog and Under Dog. As Under Dog, the client is passive, uncertain; as Top Dog, pushy, selfish, etc. - whatever fits for that

individual. The important thing is that the client speak in the present tense, in the first person as, rather than about, the person or aspect being portrayed.

Dream work is pursued in a similar manner. Instead of discussing or analyzing the meaning of a dream, it is acted out by speaking as the various parts of the dream. The client takes the parts of other people in the dream, inanimate objects, even moods. Another technique is noting the obvious. Attention is drawn to any and all of the client's behaviors; sighing, tapping a foot, looking at the floor. The client may be asked to exaggerate the behavior, or to speak as the tapping foot or whatever, again in an effort to direct awareness.

The object of all this role-playing is to reclaim disowned parts of the personality, to take responsibility for one's feelings, fantasies, dreams and behavior. Ideally, through the experience of acting as if "one" with these parts, a client moves closer to true integration.

Gestalt therapy typically takes place in a group setting, with the therapist interacting with one client at a time. However, group members may be asked to give feed-back regarding an individual's behavior, or may become involved in someone's session if there is an "unfinished situation" between the person in the "hot seat" and someone in the group. Regardless of the focus of a particular session, the goals of directing awareness and assuming responsibility for one's own experience remain constant.

Cowichan. German born, Fritz Perls spent 23 years in the United States before coming to live in Canada at age 76. He developed his approach to therapy in the 1940s and 50s, but it was his five year residence at Esalen, in Big Sur, California during the 1960s which brought him the most acclaim. In 1968 he purchased a run-down motel on Lake Cowichan, B.C. which opened in June of 1969 as the Gestalt Institute of Canada.

While at Esalen, Perls had a reputation for being difficult to get along with, a loner, but as Shepard's (1975) biography points out, "with the establishment of Cowichan...Fritz Perls had come full circle from lone wolf to kibbutznik" (p.180). Perls' vision for Cowichan was that it would function as a residential training center where Gestalt would be lived as well as taught. In Shepard's words,

Cowichan revolved about shared work, Gestalt therapy training sessions, and free-floating evening encounters in which appreciations and resentments were expressed. Fritz, Barry (Stevens), Teddy (Lyon), or week-long visitors like Esalen's Janet Lederman...led the Gestalt sessions along with those participating in the training program. And everything was grist for the therapeutic mill.(p.184)

Although Perls retained a veto power of sorts, the mechanics of running the center - from cooking to constructing buildings- were left up to the residents, who numbered from 25 to 35 at any given time. Lamper (1971)

notes that certain responsibilities, such as bookkeeping, were delegated for extended periods of time, but "as much as possible, all else [was] the the subject of discussion and open contact" (p.312). A university teacher and therapist, Lamper spent seven months on sabbatical at Cowichan being "healed". The following is his description of the community:

Our community is what Fritz wanted: an intentional community. Our intention is three-fold: (1) to provide a 'round-the-clock therapeutic atmosphere; (2) to learn how to do this; (3) to carry this back out wherever we are...Our therapeutic atmosphere is first of all the place itself. Nature heals...The atmosphere and learning how we do what we do come together in the scheduled workshop sessions. (p.312)

Fritz Perls died in March of 1970, and despite efforts to continue, the Institute did not last. However, the Gestalt "message" was alive and well, and many of the people who had been at Cowichan began working as Gestalt therapists. One of these was a woman named Bethal Phaigh, who was central to the development of the Gestalt community in the Kootenays.

### Chronology

Because this paper is organized thematically rather than chronologically, a brief synopsis of the Gestalt community's development is included at this point to provide the reader with a clear idea of the order in which events occurred.

In 1969, Fritz Perls moved to Canada, and established

the Gestalt Institute of Canada at Lake Cowichan, B.C. Bethal Phaigh attended the first residential group held at Cowichan in June of that year, and then returned to finish her studies at UBC in Vancouver. She began travelling to the Kootenays to lead Gestalt groups in 1971, eventually moving to the area in 1974.

In 1975, Bethal conducted the first of a series of training groups for potential group leaders, and in the same year two acres of Crown land, known simply as "the Gestalt land", were donated to the community. The first groups on the land were held in the summer of 1976, and a ceremony consecrating the land was led by an Indian shaman named Sun Bear in June of 1977.

Also in 1977, a non-profit society called Pacific Life Resources was taken over by the community and re-named the Kutenai Growth Society, in order to facilitate the administration of the Gestalt land and the purchase of a resort at Ainsworth Hot Springs for use as a combination intentional community and growth/healing center.

In January and March of 1979, people from the Kootenays travelled en masse to Vancouver to participate in two month-long intensive Gestalt groups offered by Don Babcock.

In 1980, shares were sold for \$100 each in order to raise enough money to purchase the Gestalt land at the original lease agreement price of \$1600, but purchase had to be postponed until the building was suitable for year-round living.

By 1983, the building on the land had two stories, a large deck, indoor plumbing and electricity, virtually all of which came to pass through volunteer labor. Ironically, in the same year, the Kutenai Growth Society (and thus the Gestalt land), was, in effect, taken over by another organization, formerly known as the Self Awareness Society.

## COMMUNITY ORIGINS : BETHAL PHAIGH

In exploring the research question concerned with the origins of Gestalt activity in the Kootenays, this chapter focuses on the life of Bethal Phaigh, whose work as a therapist was central to the development of the community. It is not the intention of this study to venerate or promote any one individual; however, it is my belief that an exploration of Bethal's background, especially as it relates to her evolution as a Gestalt group leader, will provide a greater understanding of subsequent material. She is so often referred to in the interviews, newsletters, and other material used in the study that a clarification of her role seems warranted - all the more so, given the proliferation of groups dominated by leaders who use their positions of trust to acquire and wield personal power.

## Pre-Kootenays

Bethal came originally from Saskatchewan, where she was married and raised a family. In 1964, her life changed abruptly with the sudden death of her husband. The following year, at the age of 53, she decided to re-enter university. At a time when many of her contemporaries were growing increasingly alarmed by long hair, drug use and student unrest, Bethal was immersing herself in a world rallying to such slogans as "never trust anyone over thirty". Her original career goal was to become a writer, not a therapist

or group leader. After one year at the University of British Columbia, she learned of a program at the Union Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California, which would allow her to audit graduate level courses at the University of California as a special student, due to her maturity. She based her decision to go on the fact that "I wasn't getting much out of it [UBC] at that level, at my age, and I was looking for something with a little more meat on it".

Although she entered Union Theological intending to pursue writing, her interest was soon drawn to other areas. Berkeley in 1966-67 was a focal point of many of the social, political, and philosophical changes then occurring in North America. The God-is-dead controversy was current, and interest was growing in the new humanistic psychology, particularly encounter and sensitivity groups. Training was available in Rogerian encounter group techniques, in which Bethal took part. After spending a year in Berkeley, she returned to Vancouver in order to resume her studies at UBC.

Upon her return to Vancouver, Bethal found that she was being sought out by young people who were involved in the newly emerging hippie culture. Because her stay in Berkeley had coincided with the blossoming of the drug culture in the Bay area, Bethal was not shocked by the smaller version of that phenomenon in Vancouver. At that point she did not view herself as a counselor but says, "I came to be the person who was safe to come and talk to when they were stoned. I got to be a counselor without trying to be a counselor,

because the word got out that they could come to me". She saw people who were using drugs for the first time and were scared but hesitant to contact their parents.

Low-key, Rogerian-style "rap groups" were held at Bethal's home on Sunday evenings, continuing until the following year when she first came into contact with Gestalt therapy. The first Gestalt workshop she attended was led by George and Judy Brown, and marked a major shift in her way of working with people. She was impressed with Gestalt because the Browns "were doing much more than I had ever dreamed was possible".

Bethal's transformation from budding writer to group leader may appear somewhat haphazard in retrospect, but the process was consistent with the "go with the flow" philosophy of the times and completely acceptable to the people with whom she worked. In her words,

...a lot of that group stuff happened because there was a tremendous need then. And it was only because they were coming looking. And so these [rap groups developed]... then after the year with George and Judy Brown, it started to be very important. I mean, I'd just say I would do a week-end [group] and it would fill up like everything. And then they would tell their friends and they'd come in. And I wasn't charging much, because I didn't figure I was a counselor - I only had this one year at Berkeley and this [class] with George and Judy Brown. But then at the end of the year kids would come back to me and say, 'I got more out of what we did with you on week-ends than I ever did out of UBC or anything else I did'. So I knew it was valuable.

Bethal continued her studies, but was also increasingly involved in running groups. She had been using Gestalt techniques in her groups for about one year when she heard that Fritz Perls was moving to Canada . One of her

professors, who knew of her work with groups, told her that Perls was to give a talk at a mental health center in Burnaby and would be describing his proposed institute at Cowichan. The talk was not advertised, but Perls had apparently notified various professionals and academics, hoping to attract them to train in the Gestalt method. But, as Bethal put it, "most of the trained people, who were really trained, thought he was a kook and wouldn't bother going to him. So it took people like me to tune in". She signed up for the Cowichan groups, and a short time later she and twenty or so other people were contacted and asked to come to a meeting.

He had us all come up; he had a room in a hi-rise down in the west end [of Vancouver], with no furniture...a mattress on the floor, it was very Fritz. One chair for him... Barry Stevens was there, one for her too. The rest of us sat around on the floor... and put it together, what we would do at Cowichan. And that's when I became very impressed with Fritz...this was the first time he had seriously trained people. Before that, he wasn't seriously training, he said that. That's why he left Esalen; he called it the Coney Island of Gestalt (laughter), and he wanted a place of his own. He saw himself setting up an institute, which he did at Cowichan. He bought an old motel at the edge of the lake, and had us in this room, twenty of us, and said: 'I have bought this motel, I've paid the down-payment, it's not mine it's yours now, (which really was a lie because when he died it went to his wife. Fritz should have been a little more clear about where he was with his students, in that respect. In money, he was funny; he wanted to hang onto it. I don't know, it's okay - in fact it's really good it worked out that way, or there might have been a Fritz cult, and there isn't)...And so he had us sit around with him and he said, 'I've bought this place, and it's all yours. You can stay as long as you like, you can train and become part of the staff, or you can take your training and go off

somewhere else, but I am seriously training people'. And he said 'I don't want the responsibility of keeping up the payments on the place; you between you can figure out how much you have to pay to pay this payment every month, and buy the things you need to make the place better, and do your own cooking, I'm not going to supply a cook.' And I liked that idea, that he wasn't looking after us. It felt like he was really throwing us out there on our own; here was the place and from then on it was us. And Fritz really could do that well, he was willing to take that risk.

Bethal attended the first month-long group at Cowichan, which established many of the community's ground rules. It was at Cowichan that her interest in community took root and the format used in groups there was essentially the same used later in the Kootenays. At the end of the month at Cowichan, Bethal returned to UBC to finish her bachelor's degree in sociology. She also completed all but the final year needed for a degree in secondary education.

After her experience at Cowichan, Bethal was eager to live "in community", as she referred to it, and she and a group of people shared quarters in what became known as the "Gestalt house". In all, there were four Gestalt houses, due to the need to move when rental properties were sold. The first was in the Kitsilano section of Vancouver, which became the center of Vancouver's counterculture. Bethal rented the basement, and as the main and top floors became available, people from her groups rented them. She says of those days, "I didn't make the Gestalt house, it grew like a mushroom!" Eventually the people in the house

decided to live as one household, rather than in separate suites. Bethal remembered it as being

... very loose and it was pretty scary for me...here was this whole house. There were supposed to be eight people and it got so popular that in the summer there were thirty people living there, most of them sleeping on the beach, who would only come in when it rained or something... I didn't have control over it at all. It was sort of letting go to what's happening, and that was a big lesson. I think I went through a lot of learning in communes, and it was very valuable to me.

Joyce Routenberg worked with Bethal in Vancouver and in the Kootenays, and commented on the Gestalt house days:

She was learning a lot too...there were people who were taking advantage of her. You know, she was trying to run this Gestalt community but she didn't have the personal assertiveness. And she was kind of really gentle and assuming that people would grow through all the trouble - she had the idea that everything would grow organically. Well, it was organic alright! (laughter) She had all the responsibility, she had to pay the rent...I saw her being used quite a bit, but she never saw it that way. And I saw people going to stay at that house that were really just abusing it, and abusing her and they weren't really interested in a community. What they were interested in, it seems to me, was a place to stay and then she would give them a lot of therapy... But I think after that experience she started to change a little bit, got a little bit more into some rights.

As the Gestalt house became known in counterculture circles in Vancouver, people from other parts of the province began to use it as a place to stay when they were in the city to shop or visit. There was much coming and going between Vancouver and the rural areas, where people were buying land and homesteading, communally and otherwise. The result was that Bethal came to know a number of people

living in communes and homesteads in various parts of the province. In 1972 she was a member of a team that visited several communes in B.C. to film aspects of communal life, a project funded by a Local Initiatives Project (L.I.P.) grant. Eventually she was making periodic trips to many parts of the province to lead Gestalt groups.

In the summer of 1971, Bethal went to the Kootenays for the first time, in response to the request of a friend who had moved to a commune called Harmony Gates in Perry Siding, B.C. The friend thought Gestalt would prove useful to the people in the commune, so Bethal and Joyce travelled to the area. It's difficult to determine how many of the first participants in the groups responded to a "need" or were simply intrigued by the novelty and trendiness of the still new encounter group phenomenon. Certainly Bethal's perception was that she responded to a need in the counterculture community for new communication and relationship skills. It would seem, however, that the residents of Harmony Gates were by no means in unanimous agreement regarding the need for a therapist's services. The following is an account of Bethal's reception by one of the original members of the commune:

When she came to Harmony Gates it was kind of interesting because we were really very far away from any kind of therapy. We just really were beyond anything like that...we were into, I don't know what, I guess there're names for the way we acted now (laughter) ... we didn't have any official names for it, but we just kind of did what we felt like doing...We were like little kids and we liked to play. We smoked not much dope but we did smoke a little, and when we did we just got really outrageous.

From time to time, members would go to Vancouver for various reasons:

We'd be in this room and we'd be talking to a group of, say, agriculturists, about farming - people liked to interview us - and all of a sudden we'd just turn into monkeys. Before their eyes, just slowly turn into monkeys, and we'd just start. And pretty soon we'd be fighting with each other and knocking each other over and these people would be watching us, going 'what kind of wierdos?'. But people always thought that there was a reason for it, they were always looking for some deeper meaning and there really wasn't any. The joke was there was really no deeper meaning and that we really were just bored people who wanted to make fun out of life. And we weren't even very deeply involved with each other, except that we played these silly games together. So Bethal came, (she was Jean Graham at the time), and here she was, this nice little grey-haired lady, in her little outfit, and she came up with this little van and she was with a woman named Joyce...and these people, you know, with their little stay-pressed pants - you know, they were dressed kind of like I am now (laughter) - they came marching up to do a therapy group with us. Well, let me tell you, we had a hey day with these people! (laughter) By this time Bob joined the crowd and Bob was a little nuts...he went a little nuts for a while, which just put him into our rankings because we really enjoyed him when he was nuts. When he was sane he was kind of boring... So she came and she was a therapist and what do therapists do, they offer to do therapy. Okay...so when she came Michael(one of the members of Harmony Gates) just immediately clicked into this great thing. He thought this was marvelous. Well, there was this other group of people called the Red and Blue in the Valley, who were really looney too, and he brought them along. So she was going to do this therapy group ... this one day, up in the log house. We were all gathered around and she was starting in on her therapy. Well, me and Tor and Stephen turned into monkeys before long, and she was kind of shocked, and meanwhile Bob walked in with an axe, threw it right in the middle of the floor, and he says, 'you guys want to know where any of this is at, come out to my place and take a bite'. And what he was really saying is see, he lived in the barn, and in the barn is where the cow does it's droppings, and what he was really saying is, this is all (pause) cow droppings (laughter)... Meanwhile, the whole place just turned into pandemonium. There were just nutsy, insane things going on in every corner of the place. I couldn't even begin to tell you what was going on. And

Joyce, I don't know what happened to her, but they really were shocked. What was going on, it was heavy, no doubt about it. Bob was very heavy when he was in this nutsy space that he was in ... So anyway, the last thing I remember is that it ended up that out in the lower field she gathered a group of people from the Valley...but there was a small group of people that were really unassociated with Harmony Gates that met out there, and did this whole thing. We said, okay, you can go use the lower field, you know. Because she never could make any sense out of us - we really weren't there (laughter), as far as Gestalt goes.

Joyce Routenberg, who co-led many groups with Bethal and travelled with her frequently to the Kootenays, described the way in which they started working with people in the Kootenays:

After that (the Harmony Gates experience) we started to get known in the valley, and we'd go up there and run just one group after another, and do private counselling and everything.. . One thing led to another, and we would get invited to go somewhere else, and somewhere else, and the whole thing ended up that we would take trips up to the Kootenays and perhaps spend a month there...We'd run a group for two days and then have a day off, and have another group. So sometimes we were running two a week, and there were usually ten to twelve people in a group...so I guess around a hundred people a month. And that was just for the groups. We also did private sessions as well for people, and we'd go to different people's homes and talk with them.

Question: These were two-day, week-end groups?

Well, we'd do week-ends, and then we would also do them during the week, for those people who didn't have jobs. And at that time alot of people were living on the communes, so they weren't really committed to this nine to five business. Some were, but...

Question: Were different people coming to the groups, or was there a sort of core group who came repeatedly?

No, you see we went from one place to another, so we'd go from one area to another, so they were



different people.

Question: What areas?

Well we did some in Nelson, some in the Slocan Valley; that would be in Vallican. We did some up in Hills (outside of New Denver). And then there were places I just - I don't even remember them. They would be places where there were groups of people living, but I can't remember the names...So there were all these communes dotted all around, and we used to go from one to another, so no, they weren't always the same people...And sometimes there would be a farm. There would be a few people there, but they would draw from other places as well to make a group. So maybe they didn't all come from the same place, but there was kind of an intermingling. Also, [Riondel] ...that was a place we went, and Nakusp... all around. And we went to Kaslo.

Joyce travelled with Bethal periodically from 1971 to 1975. During that time, Bethal decided she wanted to live in the country, moving first to Langley and ultimately to the Kootenays. For awhile, Joyce planned to move there as well, but she ended up staying in Vancouver. Despite the demand for their services, the group work was not lucrative, since both the ethic and the economic reality of the Kootenay counterculture dictated very low fees. Bethal received a small pension from the Ministry of Human Resources (Mincome), which, paired with a very low consumption life-style, was enough for her to live on. Joyce couldn't make a living in the Kootenays, so she stayed in the city, where she was able to work.

While Bethal was still living in Langley, she became re-acquainted with a woman name Judy Ceroli, whom she'd met earlier in the Kootenays. Bethal was growing increasingly

weary of city life and wanted to move to the Kootenays, and Judy offered to let her build a house on her (Judy's) property in Winlaw. Bethal moved officially in the autumn of 1974, at first sharing quarters with Judy and her family. It was during this period that Bethal became Bethal, deciding for spiritual reasons to discard her old name of Jean Graham.

At the age of sixty, Bethal embarked on a project common to many of the residents of the Slocan Valley at that time; building a handmade house. She did much of the actual building herself, receiving assistance at times from friends. Some work was done on the house through a system of exchange; Bethal's services as a Gestaltist traded for framing or wiring or whatever.

By 1975 Bethal was firmly established as "the Valley Gestaltist". She continued to lead groups, at times co-leading with people she'd worked with in Vancouver who came to the Kootenays at her invitation. Although she was becoming fairly well-known in the area, Bethal was never comfortable with the "guru" role she could have easily adopted. The idea of a Gestalt community had been with her since the days at Cowichan and her intention had always been to share her skills with others, as a therapist as well as a teacher.

In the summer of 1975, Bethal decided to offer Gestalt training. She was still travelling a good deal and felt strongly that it was important for other people to gain more

skill so that she was not the only Gestalt resource in the area.

At that point, it wasn't that it (a week-end group) wasn't as effective as much as that I really wanted to not be doing it all myself. I wanted to teach others more skills, and two days wasn't enough to teach the skills. They would go out and the old habits would come back. And I really wanted them to learn some skills that they could take and do; I didn't want to be doing it all the time. So I needed five days... to get that solid kind of grounding where they really felt it...I could see two days wasn't enough because they'd come so loaded that the whole two days would just be a big unloading party, and there's not that much learning from that. So we needed to un-load and then smooth out and have time to go in at a slower pace. And that took five days.

1975 was also the year that the Gestalt land came into existence. Bethal continued to lead Gestalt groups in the Kootenays, but she was also spending an ever-increasing amount of time travelling. She went regularly to certain areas including Lund, Lumby and Powell River, as well as Eugene, Oregon and other places outside of B.C. In 1976, she travelled to Scotland specifically to visit a well known intentional community called Findhorn, which combined a communal lifestyle with a non-denominational, generalized spirituality. Seeing the success (both financial and social) of Findhorn seemed to strengthen the commitment to community Bethal acquired at Cowichan, and also provided a model for incorporating spiritual values into the group process.

Increasingly, Bethal's travels brought her into contact with a wide variety of helpers, from professional psychologists to Indian shamans, many of whom came to the

Kootenays as guest groups leaders. In 1978, Bethal began travelling to Hawaii, where she studied the work of the ancient Hawaiian kahunas (healers) via the writings of Max Freedom Long. At about the same time, she came into contact with Reiki, a form of psychic healing which involves a laying-on of hands as a means of channeling healing energy. She attained the status of Reiki master, which is a form of certification allowing an individual to teach the discipline to others.

Bethal's development as a therapist was directly related to the practice of Gestalt therapy in the Kootenays. The time she spent in Berkeley was important, both in terms of her introduction to group methods and her exposure to a very intense period of countercultural development. Her maturity and experience, combined with a non-traditional outlook, made her a stable and credible source of guidance among young people in the counterculture. When she returned to Vancouver she was increasingly drawn to group work, which led to her interest and subsequent training in Gestalt.

As her Gestalt experience and the popularity of the groups increased, Bethal travelled more frequently. A desire for community, coupled with an attraction to the country, prompted her to move to the Kootenays, where she rapidly became known as a Gestaltist. Although her influence on the community was pervasive, it was never based on power or manipulation. In her role of therapist, she was a sort

of mother confessor whose special knowledge and skill touched the lives of many people, and at the same time, she was always just Bethal.

## GESTALT THERAPY IN THE KOOTENAYS

The common denominator for the people who comprised the community was, of course, Gestalt therapy. The "stuff" of the groups (problem content, techniques employed, intensity of involvement) was the same as that found in similar groups led by professionals, and people referred to the experience as therapy, albeit somewhat loosely. For example, some people would sign-up for every available group over a period of several months or longer, but they would not speak of themselves as being "in therapy". Group leaders were called therapists, but the people they worked with were not called patients or even clients; they were just the people who were in the group, (referred to in this study as participants). Because the therapy experience was basic to the existence of the community, the second research question (what services existed, and for whom?) was expanded to include a broad examination of the practice of Gestalt therapy in the Kootenays. This chapter discusses group work, informal co-therapy, the role of the therapist, and spirituality, as well as some of the strengths and weaknesses of Kootenay Gestalt.

### Groups

In their model describing the dimensions of counselling interventions, Morrill, Oeting and Hurst (1974) list three purposes of intervention: remediation, prevention and

development.

Interventions at the remedial level generally involve some pain for individuals or a failure of a group, and this has made it obvious that remedial action is needed. A discrepancy has existed between the skill and the environmental demands... [Prevention is] concerned with identifying those skills which are needed now or which may be needed in the future and with providing a means for acquiring them... Developmental interventions include those programs designed to enhance the functioning and developmental potential of healthy individuals and groups. (p.35)

Kootenay Gestalt therapy generally served either a remedial or a developmental purpose. Ongoing problems, especially between couples, would bring people to groups, as would curiosity. There was also among many people a strong belief in the value of such experience for its own sake, that personal growth was desirable and, in some way, "good for you". Certainly people were not labeled according to their personality functioning or their problems, although individuals might acquire reputations for a particular style, such as being "in their heads" (intellectualizing), or "high rollers" (expressed feelings easily and loudly). It was assumed that all who attended were "normal" (even the few with psychiatric histories), capable of assuming responsibility for their own lives.

Groups were the primary source of Gestalt experience. There were general Gestalt groups, which followed a standard format and employed basic Gestalt techniques. There were also groups which combined Gestalt with various other therapeutic and/or spiritual approaches, such as body work,

art fantasy, Jungian psychodrama and Sufi dancing, among many others. In addition, groups were periodically offered for women or (less frequently) men only.

Although the Gestalt work varied depending on the size and make-up of the groups, there were certain conditions which remained fairly constant. For the most part therapy resembled Fritz Perls' work, but consistent with the oft-repeated reminder in the Gestalt literature that no two Gestaltists practice in the same way, therapy in the Kootenays developed a characteristic style.

Prior to the donation of the Gestalt land in 1976, groups were held in rented halls or private homes. From 1976 on, they were held in a large tipi on the land in the summer (which led to a pattern of concentrating group activity in that season), and in various locations during the rest of the year. Since the group work frequently involved much crying, yelling and swearing, a relatively isolated location was preferable. Groups were often held in cabins lacking either electricity, indoor plumbing or both. (One series of groups was held in a house in the midst of a small non-counterculture settlement in Crescent Valley, and thoroughly antagonized many residents). Before the Crescent Valley series in 1975, groups were held on week-ends, but after 1975 they were almost exclusively conducted in week-long blocks. The therapy "work" was essentially the same, although the pace could be more leisurely during the longer groups.

Groups usually began in the morning, and differed in one way quite dramatically from Perls' with the existence of the phenomenon known as (Slocan) "Valley time". At Cowichan groups started on time; one didn't keep Fritz waiting and he did not suffer late-comers. However, in the Kootenays, a group scheduled for 9:00 a.m. might not get going until 10:00 or 11:00. As at Cowichan where "everything was grist for the therapeutic mill", such here-and-now issues were often a focus for group work, so the people who were only fifteen minutes late could use their frustration with the people who were an hour and a half late as a springboard for "getting into their feelings".

How a session started often depended on whether the participants were mostly newcomers to Gestalt or had among their ranks several of what were jokingly called "high rollers". High rollers were people who had done several groups before and had lost their shyness of being in the center; they were also generally clearer about what they felt and how to express it. Using the example of lateness, a relatively prompt high roller might express a desire to work at the beginning of the group, starting with frustration at having to wait and leading into a "workout" with a general theme of having been kept waiting in the past.

At other times, especially on the first day of a group, a session would begin with an exercise or game of some sort. Some examples of these were guided fantasy; pairing-up to

take turns describing moment-to-moment awareness, or communicate non-verbally; approaching the person in the group one felt most threatened by or attracted to. After the exercise, people would be asked to share their experiences, and the focus of that sharing eventually narrowed to the concerns of one individual.

Much of Fritz Perls' work involved taking what came to be known as the "hot seat", but in the Kootenays there was no hot seat, and often no chairs. Groups were conducted sitting more or less in a circle, with some pillows and perhaps a mattress in the middle. There was usually something to hit the pillow with, such as a piece of plastic pipe, or an old tennis racquet. When someone wanted to work on a problem, she or he went to the middle of the circle ("got on the mat"), and "worked". Most of the time, therapy consisted of one person at a time "working out", although occasionally a more experienced person might sit with someone off to the side who had been particularly affected by the main workout.

During a workout, interaction was generally between the person on the mat and the therapist, though sometimes other participants might suggest a direction (with the understanding that suggestions that didn't feel right could be ignored). At times the work-out included making direct contact with other participants. One might "make the rounds", contacting each member of the group one-by-one, or perhaps talk directly to one particular group member with

whom one had difficulty.

Communication was an ongoing theme and much of the interpersonal work revolved around applying certain principles designed to slow down and clarify interactions. For a newcomer, a good deal of the group work consisted of learning these principles, which included:

1. Never assume you know what another person thinks or feels since any evaluation of that sort is ultimately your own "fantasy". This rule manifested in the form of a ubiquitous phrase, "my fantasy is...", which generally preceded any statement regarding the mental or feeling state of another. For example, one might say "my fantasy is that you want to run away" rather than "you just want to run away", the point being to communicate to others that you understand that your "fantasies" about them are essentially speculation, giving them the opportunity to accept or reject your appraisal.

2. No judgements. An emphatic "that's a judgement" was a frequent response to statements which implied judgement of someone's character or behavior, especially any type of name calling. Thus, "I hate it when you don't look at me when you speak" rather than "you're so evasive"

3. Distinguish between thoughts and feelings. Often, because there was such an emphasis on discovering and expressing feelings, people tended to slip into calling everything a feeling and making judgements in the guise of feeling statements; "I feel like you ...(aren't interested,

hate me, etc.)" as opposed to "I feel...(scared, mad, etc.)".

4. Importance of "I statements". Again based on the idea that one can only be certain of one's own experience and that communication proceeds most efficiently and cleanly on that level.

5. Be specific. "You always...", "you never..."(say that, leave, nag, etc.) kinds of sweeping statements were broken down into specific circumstances. Sometimes this principle led to very legalistic kinds of interaction. For example, "you're always interrupting me", might elicit the response "when was the last time that happened", which might lead to "last night when we were eating dinner", and so on until the process and the feeling it engendered were clear. This was often applicable to problems between couples who despaired at the enormity of the gulf between them; these could frequently be shown to stem from unexpressed resentments resulting from several relatively minor specific instances. These principles were also applied to much of the communication outside of the groups, forming the basis for identification with the larger Gestalt community.

In addition to providing a common jargon and set of social "rules", the groups also brought people together at a deeper level. People grieved and raged in front of each other, expressing feelings they'd held in for years, and that was a powerful bond. A typical workout might have someone who'd become aware of feelings of anger literally

beating them out on a pillow, or sobbing into the same pillow over a hurtful childhood experience. Often themes would emerge, and one person's workout would spark feelings in someone else with a similar experience. Thus a group might end up spending a good deal of time on unexpressive fathers, loss, or jealousy.

Gestalt groups held in many locations throughout the Kootenays were the foundation of the community, providing a common experience and vocabulary. In the groups one was introduced to the Gestalt world-view, as well as the use of various therapy techniques. In addition, the group experience fostered a sense of intimacy between people who otherwise might have stayed on more superficial terms with one another.

#### Co-therapy

The process I'm calling co-therapy was actually quite informal; people were not linked-up with one another to be therapy "buddies", but they did "play therapist" for one another outside the groups. To a large extent this was from necessity, since the population served by the groups was spread out over a large area, and one might be 10, 20 or 50 miles away from a therapist. Also, as in many other aspects of counterculture life, there was a strong belief that people could help themselves; that if one were reasonably conscientious and stuck to the basic Gestalt "rules", no

harm and much good could come from just being able to unload with a friend during a crisis in daily life. Diana described the importance of helping each other outside the group in the following:

We sort of graduated from Bethal, from being dependent on her...and of course it didn't cost anything for us to call each other up either, and sort of exchange help. So somebody would be leaving their husband or something, or going through a great deal of pain, and they would call me up and they would come up here and talk it out, cry it out, beat it out on a pillow. Once I had the R.C.M.P. up here because they thought someone was being killed. I remember another time when I was doing it by myself in the woods in an old cabin, the guy who owned the land came up and looked very curiously in at the door at me. He was very upset; he thought someone was dying. It's always a shock to them when you look up and smile and say "I'm fine, I'm just fine", and then go back to you're keening. The sounds that come out are sounds you don't hear in civilization, not in North American civilization. So they think a deer has been stabbed or something.

When she needed some help in "Gestaltting", she would often ask her mate, "who was just the last person to take it to", or one of her Gestalt friends:

and we would go through this ritual of the other person being the therapist, being the the sane person, sort of an anchor in a way, and the other person got to freak out. I'm sure it looked quite ludicrous, but it served some kind of purpose... If Gestalt hadn't been there, you know, as a ritual, I probably would have gone over and just sobbed in somebody's lap, I don't know.

As the preceding passage implies, to an extent the co-therapy process was a ritualized way of providing a "shoulder to cry on". It also reinforced group experiences by bringing what had been learned in groups into everyday

life. The Gestalt network was strengthened as the common experience of Gestalt expanded to include mutual aid.

### Therapists

The role of therapist in the Kootenay Gestalt community shared some characteristics with the traditional role, but also differed from it in many respects. A major difference involved attitudes toward the need for formal training and/or degrees. Except for some of the visiting therapists who led summer groups on the Gestalt land, virtually none of the people who took on that role had graduate degrees in psychology, counselling or related fields, and some had no degrees at all. If the Kootenay Gestalt community had been a governmental agency, few if any of the therapists would have been considered qualified beyond the level of intake worker.

Yet, for the people in the community, this lack of certification was not an issue. Indeed if any, the issue was whether people with degrees were trustworthy after going through academic training, which was considered a potentially distorting and de-humanizing process. Also, Fritz Perls never set formal standards of training or practice, and the people who were trained at Cowichan clearly believed they went out into the world to practice Gestalt with his blessing, regardless of their level of academic achievement.

That people have some kind of training was considered important; the seriousness of the therapy process was

recognized, as was the need for experience and sensitivity on the part of a therapist. The difference lay in the definition of training, and the basis for determining whether someone was ready to shift from the status of experienced group member to that of therapist.

Training took place in designated groups which differed little from standard Gestalt groups, and for the most part took the form of starting to work with people in the group. Bethal was present and worked with people who specifically asked for her, but she would often ask if any of the trainees wanted to conduct a session. The point when a trainee said "I would" was important, because the transition from participant to therapist was made in public. Of course one's attendance at a training group, necessarily approved by Bethal, bespoke the desire to become a therapist, but the first time someone said "I'd like to work with this person" was essentially a public declaration along the lines of "I'm good enough, competent enough, to do this". In contrast, a practicum placement might be a professional trainee's first experience in the role of facilitator, but position and authority are established by virtue of being introduced as someone who is assumed to already possess a certain level of expertise (whether the assumption is warranted or not),

Attitudes toward therapists were consistent with attitudes toward workers in general; that is, based more on perceived competence than on meeting specific professional standards. If one could build houses that didn't fall down,

one could claim to be a carpenter; if one could wire a house, one was an electrician; and if one could "do Gestalt" with people and they felt good about it afterwards, one was a therapist. Of course there was an appreciation for the fact that working with people is more complex than working with inanimate objects, which is why I think that initial leap into the therapist role was critical. There was a sense of tampering with powerful forces, dabbling in magic, requiring one to be "very together" before taking on that responsibility. Though by no means assuring the elimination of poor practice, the public nature of Gestalt groups (as well as the generally high degree of assertiveness displayed by participants), did act as a sort of organic selection committee.

The countercultural ideal of equality and role flexibility, along with a tendency to prefer co-operative to hierarchical organization, meant that the status accorded to traditional therapists was largely lacking. Certainly Bethal was respected and her perspective carried weight, but there was no empire with Bethal at the top and various levels of trainees below. And in the Kootenays, which even in the 1970's was economically depressed, no one other than Bethal could afford to be a full time therapist, possible for her only because of a small pension.

The same spirit of experimentation that brought people to the Kootenays and to the groups allowed a less rigid sense of role boundaries to develop. It was easier to cross

the line separating helper and helpee than in a more traditional setting. So there were people who became therapists who had always had an interest in the field but who had, for various reasons, given up on the academic route; and there were others with no previous interest or background, who became intrigued with the role for a time and abandoned it later.

Visiting therapists. In addition to the people trained by Bethal, there were also many other group leaders who came to the area. Several had advanced degrees and practices in urban areas, and came to the Kootenays for a sort of working holiday. Some, like Don Babcock and Joyce Frazee (who also trained at Cowichan) had repeated contact with the community in the Kootenays. Others, who got to know Bethal during her travels, were invited by her to lead or co-lead groups on the Gestalt land.

Despite the fact that a visiting therapist might have a Ph.D, there was no special status (or price) accorded to her or him. If one expected to be paid \$200 per day, one stayed home. Prices for groups did vary, and were set by the group leader (in addition to a set fee for food), but by city standards, they were very low.

### Spiritual Elements

In their book The Creative Counselor, Nicholson and Golsan (1983) exhort the counseling profession to expand the

scope of intervention to include the spiritual parts of their client's lives:

Previous boundaries for counselor intervention not only stopped at remediation, but tended also to focus narrowly within the confines of the client's psychological functioning (affective, cognitive, behavioral). Unfortunately, this was often to the exclusion of the spiritual and physical domains which are part of every one of us (p.120).

They also note the increase in interest over the past decade in the concept of holistic health, with it's emphasis on the interaction between mind, body and spirit. At the time when Gestalt groups were becoming popular in the Kootenays, there was little such interest evident in professional circles; this was especially so in rural areas, where counselling services were likely to be few and not particularly innovative.

Although Fritz Perls did not include spiritual concerns in his formulation of Gestalt, in the Kootenays such considerations were quite real. An interest in all manner of non-traditional (to the West) spiritual and psychic pursuits was an integral part of the counterculture. This interest manifested increasingly in the groups, a trend also evident in centers such as Esalen. In the Kootenays there were several centers or groups practicing various spiritual approaches, including Buddhist meditation, Transcendental Meditation, teachings of Mahara Ji, Eckankar, and others. There was also a Quaker community in Argenta and the Yasodhara Ashram in Kootenay Bay, as well as the various Doukhobor factions.

Not everyone involved in the counterculture was spiritually inclined, but the prevailing ethic demanded that even seemingly far-fetched approaches be given at least a fair hearing, if not universal acceptance. In the groups, notions such as seeing auras, channeling healing energy or concentrating on white light were accepted by most and tolerated by the rest. However, the emphasis was always one of a generalized spirituality, rather than any particular "brand".

As stated earlier, much of the spiritual tone of the groups was due to Bethal's influence. Throughout the 70's, she continued to travel, using the Kootenays as home base. Most of her travelling revolved around leading Gestalt groups, which attracted a wide range of people, including many who followed a variety of spiritual paths. She also visited several healing and spiritual centers. As a result, she made an increasing number of contacts with many shamans, psychics and healers, some of whom eventually came to the Gestalt land to lead workshops. Thus, the land was formally consecrated by an Indian shaman, and work (whether physical labor or Gestalt) generally began and ended with an attunement (a period of silence during which participants held hands and closed their eyes while standing or sitting in a circle).

"Introduction to Sufi practices", "Women's mysteries", "Psychic awareness retreat", "A guided spiritual adventure", "Yoga, dance and Gestalt", were some of the groups offered.

Many of the spiritual workshops were completely separate from Gestalt, while others combined Gestalt work throughout the group or set aside certain times of the day for it. Not everyone in the community attended the spiritual groups, as some people were interested only in basic Gestalt.

Gestalt therapy in the Kootenays evolved into a kind of underground institution, a grass-roots counselling service which provided direct service, training and education for one segment of the counterculture (as well as an occasional adventuresome "straight" person). Consistent with trends in other centers during the seventies (most notably Esalen), over the years the practice incorporated ideas from other disciplines and approaches. Jim Simkin, an associate of Perls and a so-called first generation Gestaltist (Kogan, 1973), viewed Gestalt as "a philosophy of life...a way of living in a very simple, direct and easier way, much less complicated" (p.136). This sentiment was shared by many in the Kootenays, as the use of Gestalt spread from the confines of the groups to the outside world.

### Therapy in Retrospect

Although it was necessary to limit the number of formal interviews, I did speak informally with many other people in the community about their experiences. Since I was also a part of that era, there was a natural tendency for my interactions with other former Gestaltees to include a

certain amount of discussion and reflection on our common past. These tended to be people who had been involved in the community for a long time, which likely reduced the chances of hearing from people who might have had less flattering perspectives. Nevertheless, their perceptions contributed to the overall picture of the therapy experience.

I asked people, both formally and informally, how they viewed their experiences with Gestalt now. Although most had moved on to other systems, there was nearly unanimous agreement that the experience had been worthwhile, even among those who now have serious differences with Gestalt as either a therapy or a world view. The people I spoke with who were not directly involved with the community tended to be somewhat bemused or impatient with the Gestaltees' use of the jargon, and the seemingly endless process of "clearing" (resolving tensions) in interactions. However, they also tended to believe that, regardless of how silly it looked to an outsider, Gestalt seemed to make a difference for those who pursued it.

With the exception of one woman whose Christian beliefs led her to fear that Satan might be behind the practice of Gestalt, there was general agreement among the people I spoke with that it had been a benevolent force in the community, and there was no tendency to discount the experience as merely youthful rebellion or frivolity. Most people expressed a strong appreciation for what they got from Gestalt, which often involved validation of their

feelings, learning to communicate more openly and regaining a sense of power over their lives. At the same time, people were not shy about stating their views regarding possible drawbacks to the Gestalt approach.

One of the people I interviewed was chosen because his experience in the Gestalt community was different from most people's, and although his case was extreme, it was not unique. An examination of his experience will hopefully aid in clarifying some of the limitations of Kootenay Gestalt.

Dan's participation in groups usually revolved around a classic case of what was known as "shit or get off the pot", the exhortation directed at someone who was perceived to be wasting the group's time by occupying the center (the mat) but not "getting into" feelings. Typically, a workout would begin with a request to get on the mat and then proceed through a series of very loose stages; a description of a situation or a dream led into a form of role-playing which culminated some sort of feeling release, be it grief, rage or whatever. There was a cognitive component as well, but it was generally not considered valid without the release. When Dan worked, he did all the right things and followed all of the therapist's suggestions, but he never experienced an intense feeling release, never got into his feelings. While enacting a particularly poignant scene from the past, he might have some teariness, but his little feelings never "went anywhere".

Often Dan's workouts would be very long as the

therapist and some participants offered numerous suggestions in hope of facilitating an expression of feeling, and frequently people in the group became frustrated and impatient with his inability to produce. There was no Synanon type of denouncement in such a situation, and there was a strict adherence to "I statements", as opposed to judgements and name-calling. But despite the insistence on "keeping it clean", the fact that people reacted so negatively had an effect on Dan. Although he felt badly about not being able to "do" Gestalt, he said he

...was thrilled by the possibility that one could express oneself, that it would make a difference... I had a lot of beliefs after reading books about Gestalt, that if I expressed feelings it would erase all of my problems, but I got really hung-up and it never worked for me. What happened instead was, when I got on the mat I would get numb all over. 'Shit or get off the pot'. It was awful. Even now when I think about it, it's very uncomfortable - I feel bad all over, I feel sad... I remember how humiliated I felt. I felt so powerless, and other people were triggered by that. I felt dumped on.

In discussing his experiences, Dan said that he has come to appreciate the extent to which he played a part in those unpleasant situations, and that he does not blame anyone.

And at the same time,

there's that part of me that's pissed-off, hurt, resentful for being mis-understood; I'm still sorting through that. I see there was a potential for me to know better, but I was so scared I just did not know how to be. I just didn't fit into the Gestalt mold.

In retrospect, Dan says he thinks he "was very cared for", in that he was not ostracized or ridiculed, and many people spent a good deal of time trying to help him. But at

the time, his predominant feeling was that he was somehow deficient and that people merely tolerated his presence, "like people were putting up with me and like there was an unspoken judgement along the lines of 'he's a nice guy, but he's really not good enough'".

This example points out a major limitation/drawback of Gestalt (and perhaps other equally drama-prone approaches), which was a pressure to perform, resulting in a certain intolerance toward less feeling-oriented, less expressive personal styles. Gestalt was enthusiastically embraced and seemed to have unlimited potential as an interpersonal technology. It all made so much sense, that the possibility that it might not be universally applicable was not seriously considered. People like Dan were either manipulating the group with their "mind-fucking" (Perls' term) or else just needed more time in order to "let it happen". Either of these might have been true, but equally likely is the possibility that the approach wasn't suited to everyone's style. Under such circumstances, someone like Dan could be caught in a spiral of failure with no outlet for the feelings being generated by his inability to get into feelings. He did not experience the typical progression from mild to intense feeling, culminating in a powerful release and increased understanding of whatever incident or pattern was at issue. Talking about feelings was not acceptable, but his attempts to express feelings (raising his voice, pounding, etc.) were hollow and obviously

unconnected to any passion.

Dan was very clear in stating that the Gestalt groups did not create his discomfort with people; he came to the groups already feeling "not okay". For an individual with a fairly strong ego, the pressure to perform might not present much of a problem if she or he is able to shrug it off. For someone with an already low self-image, however, the possibility exists that such a self-image will be re-inforced rather than diminished, compounding the problem that brought the person to the group to begin with. Despite the belief in the rightness of living without "shoulds", I think there were a number of unspoken "shoulds" at work, group norms which were not understood as such by participants. Some of these shoulds were things like: one should be open; in touch with feelings rather than "in your head"; be non-judgemental; easy-going (not uptight).

The existence of such norms seems an inevitable part of any group's development; in a therapy or growth setting, where people are potentially quite vulnerable, it is important to make basic assumptions explicit and to periodically evaluate whether the approach is meeting the needs of the participants. Unfortunately, the emphasis placed (especially by Fritz Perls) on participants taking full and sole responsibility for their level of involvement in a group may act against such evaluation.

Ironically, there was in Gestalt (at least as practiced in the Kootenays) a tendency to combine a philosophy

emphasizing personal liberty with a fairly rigid, ritualized format. It was common, especially outside of the groups, for interactions to become quite legalistic; more than one person spoke about the tendency to use Gestalt as a weapon to "beat someone (usually a spouse) over the head with". Although not necessarily a function of Gestalt theory or philosophy, in practice there tended to be a lack of forgiveness; that is, a belief in the need to keep things clear and the conviction that anything short of total resolution would lead to a storing up of resentments (and later problems) often caused even minor disagreements to become bogged down in drawn out negotiations. In Gestalt theory, the goal of awareness is self-acceptance, but in practice I think people often felt an implied criticism and a pressure to "reform" when some unflattering aspect was brought to light. It was very difficult to let things go, and it's possible that for some people the zealous pursuit of Gestalt purity created new problems.

Diana:

The space between people had to be clear of obstacles, of resentments, clear of anger or hurt, before there could be love between them...[The idea was] that those things are there, they can be cleared; it's a lot of work and it's constant vigil, but it's possible to keep clear. The thing is, what I later learned is that sometimes it's more work than it's worth to keep clear between some people. But what it seemed to me at the time was that I could do that with everybody. And that's what we left with, that we could go out in the world and be clear with everyone. It's impossible, because there's not enough time in the day to keep that going. And we were such idealists, we thought we could, we thought we could live that way. Because in the group you'd have things coming up because people

were in a living situation where they were thrown together with their differences. So we were able, to a very high degree, to keep the air between each other clear, so that love, or whatever you want to call it - good feelings - could be there.

## FROM THERAPY TO COMMUNITY

As more people took part in Gestalt groups, there was a sense of being part of something larger than just the group one happened to be in at the time. This chapter addresses the third and fourth research questions: (a) How did the Gestalt community evolve? (b) What organizational structures were established and how did they function?

## The People

Bethal Phaigh was the most consistent member of the community over the years, and the following are her perceptions of the people who came to the groups and ultimately formed the community:

They were people who had decided that these places were worth putting energy into. They really were not just drifters moving on...[they were] people who were really into making a community, and didn't have the skills for communication. They had come out of big cities, like L.A. and New York, and living in the country and communicating at that level was a whole new thing for them ... they'd spent a lot of time in classrooms and everything had been in their heads; they were not in touch much with their feelings. But they were getting in touch with the land, they knew there was something there...they wanted to stay there and wanted to find out what it was that made it work for them. So they were serious about finding ways to do it. And whenever they came to the groups, there would be something happen that they would know this affected their lives, that they had learned something. They didn't know just what it was half the time. There was a real, solid community feeling after every group, and it's what they were looking for, and it would just happen during this magical two days ... What I saw happening was, they had come out of the cities where nobody said anything about feelings, and you get away with it because it's big enough and you sort of melt into the

background and do it and somehow live there. And they'd come out to the country where you can't do that anymore. It's very evident if you're going to shut yourself off; you're going to feel it and all of your neighbors are. They didn't have the skills, they hadn't learned another way of communicating. So the groups gave them a little bit of a key. And once they had that, the magic kept going. It was like a lifesaver and I think that's why they were drawn together.

The issues that brought people to the groups, apart from curiosity, were frequently conflicts between couples. In Bethal's words,

they were working out the hassles that happened in the free relationships that were happening at that time, which were new to people; they didn't have the tools to handle them... But mostly it wasn't even so much between lovers as that the patterns they had learned in the city did not work anymore. It was much too close for those patterns to work - they couldn't evade their reality. And in the city they would have avoided and clammed-up. They could no longer do that because it was too evident. There was no place to hide or go. And a lot of them did it by smoking a lot of dope...A lot of them were trying to do it with dope and finding out that dope didn't make it; there was more than that. ...

Another Cowichan-trained therapist involved with the community was Don Babcock. In addition to his practice in Vancouver, he led groups in the Kootenays about three times a year over a period of four or five years. When asked about his impressions of the area and the people he responded:

Well it was very nice because the people all knew each other and they had alot in common. You know they had the land in common and the love of nature in common. They were naturally holistic thinkers... unlike city people, who tend to have lost their contact with nature and the value of nature. And Gestalt is a holistic outlook...it seemed to suit that whole area very nice that sort of thinking.

There were co-operatives; all this co-operative thinking is field thinking. And if you include nature in it and the future generation as well, then your holistic mentality really blossoms. And the Kootenays certainly had that.

In addition to seeing people in the Kootenays, Don worked with Kootenay people in his Vancouver groups. A few of the month-long groups were filled exclusively with Kootenay people, who travelled en masse to Vancouver in order to immerse themselves in a more intensive therapy experience. In response to the question of how his practice in Vancouver differed from his experiences in the Kootenays, he said:

Well, the feeling was that they were already a group. You didn't have to form a group, it was already formed. In the sixties of course, that was very popular, the hippie/counterculture movement. Gestalt appealed to them. The square society, you know, the ordinary established society that we lived with in the city, didn't really take hold of Gestalt. A few people would, university people. But the average businessman wouldn't have anything to do with it. Since then, Gestalt has sort of lost favor. You know, it's not a popular movement anymore, as it was then.

In response to the question of how the "natural group" affected the progress of a Gestalt group, he said:

You'd get down to more fundamental questions and jealousies ...relationships between this family and that family were already the stuff of the [group] work. That would rarely happen in the city; the people would come and not know each other. But there was already a web of interaction with all the people in the group. And then when they left the group, they would go back to their area and everybody there would have to deal with the new learning. And so that would get them to come to the groups too. You certainly had the feeling that if you created an event in a Gestalt group, it really went out into the area and made things happen... so that was the nice thing about working up there; in a way, you were working for the whole area...I felt the

whole area was an extended family to some degree, with all the troubles that went on between them - and the harmonies too. You know, this couple would be having marital problems and this other couple were maybe exchanging sexual encounters across families. You'd never get two couples like that in the city so much, unless they had decided to come to the group that way to begin with. But up in the Kootenays all these events and all these jealousies were going on, and they'd be all worked out in the group quite often. So it was quite tribal (laughter).

Not all the people who attended groups knew each other beforehand, but because the communities were so small, contact in the groups invariably spilled over into everyday life. Groups were comprised mostly of people from the counterculture, who brought with them an expectation of kinship with other people pursuing a similar lifestyle. Long hair and folksy clothing were a means of identification as much as expressions of personal preference, and an interest in self-awareness and Gestalt was yet another common bond, one potentially much more powerful than styles of hair and clothing.

There was about the whole era and area a sense of participating in something new and important, and a willingness to experiment. That a group might take place in a cabin or tipi rather than an office building, with people sleeping on the floor and attending to needs such as fire wood and meals themselves was taken as a matter of course. As Don recalled:

... it was part of the bonding. The rough and tumble of that era was just part of everybody coming together. ... so there was a great coming together on the subjects of food and shelter and where to work.

And there was a pioneering feeling about Gestalt anyway at the time; it was part of the whole counterculture movement, a new way to be... and if somebody couldn't afford to come there was a way found to get them there. And that included food and shelter and everything, not only the therapy, which was there for growth. I look back at that whole experience in the Kootenays as something very special.

Saul also described the way in which Gestalt created a bond between people outside of the groups:

It became a way of knowing other people. It became one way of community contact, of knowing people who might otherwise not have known or met [each other]. And also know about them in a rather intimate way. You know, very often people would bring serious and deep problems in their lives to these workshops. So you'd not only just get to know them on a friendly basis, you know you'd get to know what their problems were, also what their joys were, what their lives were like. I'd say it had the effect of bringing a lot of people together who otherwise would have probably not come together to know each other and relate to each other.

Many of the people I spoke with sought out the groups during a time when they were having problems with a mate, although this was by no means universal. Celeste described her reasons for getting involved:

I was just on the edge a lot...I had a very difficult three or four years. I'd say my life turned totally upside-down...it was like every emotion I'd ever had all my life that had never been expressed or whatever - like somebody just came and turned the volume up. I'd also just gone through a period where I'd been smoking a lot of dope, and I think that ungrounded me ... sometimes think if I hadn't run into Bethal and those groups - I really do feel I was fortunate to have had that. I felt if I'd been any other place maybe I could have been locked up, or who knows... I really was having a hard time, at an outer level getting things done. I couldn't have held down a job at that point in my life. It would have been way too difficult.

Some people got involved out of curiosity, as did many of the Harmony Gates people. Johnny met Bethal when she worked briefly as a cook for a tree planting crew. They became friends and "she would talk about this thing called Gestalt". He was intrigued and told Bethal that she was welcome to use his house if she ever needed a place to hold a group. A while later she called and took him up on his offer, and three or four groups were held at his house.

Diana attended many groups over a long period of time, and her account contains elements common to the experiences of several of the people I interviewed. Although she's not representative in a strict sense, her ability to articulate those common experiences led to the inclusion of the following passage. She attended the groups with her mate, as they "... were fighting like cats and dogs - we were desperate". They attended every group they could, travelling as far as Lund, which was on Bethal's "circuit" of places where she regularly held groups. Once involved, she became intrigued with the process of Gestalt:

I never came at it intellectually at all, not at all. And I did read the literature, but to me they were two separate things. There was the reading, and I'd done a lot of reading in college, and I read a lot while I was going to the groups, but then there was the experience... So there is that, the beauty of it when it works. And that's separate from people getting cured or not having problems in their life or not having pain. The other thing I liked about the groups and that certainly meant as much to me, was that I made friends, intimate friends that I still have. And I was brought close to people, literally close in all those groups. You know, holding hands, hugging, touching - all that, it was an olly-olly-in-free space. ...That was what was so wonderful about what Bethal did, especially in that Crescent valley group, the week-long

groups she did there. Because she laid down rules, everybody had the same rules. And so we had this little universe going, and because we were all there together, you accept all the same rules. And then coming out, of course, was a bit of a shock. You go up to your mother or whatever who you loved all these years, and suddenly she finds out that you really hate her and have resented her - I mean, in other words, she's not going to be open because she doesn't know all the rules.

Question: Were there attempts like that to bridge the gap between the groups and the rest of the world?

Everyone did, of course. They went home to their husbands and wives and tried to tell them what it was all about, the real right way to live, unless their husbands went with them.

Question : Did you have that experience?

Well Jack and I went together, so what we'd do is, we'd take the rules and beat each other over the head with them...So say the rule that you're supposed to be honest. You're so honest about the other person, about what you think about the other person, that you're alienating them at all times. And with that same rule of honesty, you can work someone into a corner where they can't move and then you can berate them for not telling you their feelings. You can do anything with these rules. I think the best thing to do is - I mean some of it sifts down eventually into your consciousness, but then so does any reasonable theory of how people can get along together; like Christianity, or Buddhism or anything. So what I got out of Gestalt was not being cured, as I said... I got a lot of good friends and a heightened awareness of the aesthetics of just everyday arguments, or dreams; it sort of showed me how everything is beautifully shaped, or can be beautifully shaped, and I've always appreciated when that happens anyway.

### The Gestalt Land

For the most part, the people who attended the Gestalt groups were already committed to some kind of community ideal. Many had come to the area as part of or in search of a communal group, in hopes of creating an extended family.

Most of those groupings were short-lived, creating in some people both a desire to find a system which would help to surmount the difficulties encountered in the earlier communal experiments, as well as a certain reluctance to commit themselves to a full-fledged intentional community. In addition, there were two other major factors contributing to the shift from random group attendance to the development of a sense of community; the change in the length of groups and the acquisition of the Gestalt land.

In the course of a week-end group, people performed housekeeping chores co-operatively, but there was no particular organization involved. With the change to week-long groups, which were initiated by the first series of training groups Bethal offered, the groups became more structured along the lines followed by groups at Cowichan.

Each group functioned as a mini-community for the week; time was more structured, meals and housekeeping chores were scheduled, along with the therapy sessions and times for sharing resentments and appreciations which had accumulated during the day. When groups were held on the Gestalt land, work on the building was incorporated into the group structure as well. Group costs could be kept down when meal preparation and maintenance jobs were carried out by participants, but that was not the primary reason for structuring the groups in such a way. Bethal believed very strongly in the importance of living "in community", both as a model for "real life" and as an ideal environment for

practicing Gestalt. In this way, Gestalt served as a therapeutic approach and as a system for guiding community life. The bonds created through sharing the intimacy of the therapeutic process were deepened further as more and more people participated in these community-oriented groups.

The second factor, which occurred at about the same time that the training groups were first held, was the acquisition of what was always known simply as "the Gestalt land", and the formation of the Kutenai Growth society. The community, as mentioned previously, was never centered in one location, although for a time a group formed around the idea of purchasing a small and rather dilapidated resort at Ainsworth Hot Springs (20 miles east of Nelson), for use as a semi-residential growth and healing center. A society was formed, donations were solicited and meetings were held to determine the nature and direction of the potential center, but the price of over one million dollars ultimately put "the Ainsworth dream" beyond the community's resources. However, the Gestalt land (which was not suitable for a residential center), did provide a focus similar to that of many ethnic communities which construct meeting halls and schedule social, cultural and/or religious activities.

The land originally belonged to a woman named Marcia Braundy, who had taken out the crown lease with a partner who subsequently left the area. Marcia had been in several groups and was aware of Bethal's dream of having a place to hold retreats and conduct groups. When she realized that

the location and difficult access to the land made it unsuitable for her town-oriented activities, she and Bethal discussed using the land for the Gestalt community. Although Marcia was willing to hand over legal ownership of the land, for the sake of simplicity she remained the owner on paper, disseminating bills and information to whoever filled the co-ordinator's role. Some meetings were held with interested Gestaltees where, in Marcia's words,

We drew-up our personal lease agreements, about the land and who it belongs to, and that sort of thing. You know, what my rights are on it, and what the community's rights are on it.

Marcia hadn't been to any groups on the land in a number of years, but she continued to receive and forward the bills, saying she "feels fine to have that be my part of it, my commitment to the land". She and Bethal both have wills specifying the disposition of the land in the event of either's death.

Having the Gestalt land meant several things, one being that for the first time, groups could be scheduled well in advance with assurance that a site was guaranteed. Also, a newsletter was begun as a source of information regarding the scheduling of summer groups, updates on progress on the land development and miscellaneous Gestalt-oriented news. Because the land was leased from the crown, there were conditions to be met regarding a level of development required (to be accomplished in a specified number of years) before purchase was possible.

As there was no Gestalt trust fund or wealthy

benefactors to provide the money necessary to pay for building a permanent structure, the work was done almost completely by the community on a volunteer basis. Work parties were scheduled, sometimes around specific goals such as getting the roof on or the foundations poured, at other times to take care of the many accumulated small jobs. Saul's proximity to the Gestalt land put him in a position to provide much of the continuity necessary to keep the project afloat, and I asked him to describe how the work on the land was accomplished:

Just by telephone calls. Work days were called - everybody knew...You know, there's this wonderful set of pictures that somebody took...of the day we poured the footings, with cement flying all over the place and everybody being dirty and standing around nude in front of the cement truck driver, who was this real straight guy. And he was standing there real stone faced, you know. All these people pouring cement on this really hot day - it just happened, that's all. I mean, people were told it was cement pouring day and people showed up. People came from Nelson, and New Denver and Winlaw and all over. And maybe even as far away as Kaslo and Argenta. There were also people from California and Oregon who were up for workshops... who were probably also there on work days. People always were there when a work day was called...And how we decided who did what - well, it was just a matter of who knew what. If you knew more about it, you got to do it or tell other people what to do. It was pretty democratic, just based on knowledge.

I asked Saul if the Gestalt process ever overlapped into those times when the main purpose of being together was work rather than therapy:

Tempers would fly sometimes, yeah...How would that go? Well, we'd just stop and whoever was angry would just be angry at whoever they were being angry with, and you know, communication would happen and no doubt someone would go over and act as mediator,

or facilitator, or therapist, or whatever. Sometimes it would be Bethal, sometimes it would be someone else. Oh yeah, there would definitely be - because some people were giving directions and other people were expected to follow directions, and you know, authority clashes would happen and feelings were hurt sometimes... But for the most part, it was quite harmonious.

## Organization

The organizational structure of the community was very loose, consisting primarily of the two positions of program co-ordinator and caretaker. The co-ordinator was responsible for organizing groups held on the Gestalt land, a well as for writing and mailing the newsletter which described the groups, and the caretaker was responsible for overseeing the Gestalt land. For the most part these positions were held on a voluntary basis, but at times were paid, depending on the responsibilities undertaken. Consistent with both counterculture and Gestalt philosophy, roles and duties were flexible and jobs were taken on by whoever had the time or interest.

As a non-profit society, the Kootenai Growth Society had a formal structure on paper, but dealings were in fact quite informal. Meetings (other than groups) were not held on a regular basis, but were called when needed, usually by Bethal. Bethal had no title (the positions were held by other people), but as the most consistent member of the community she had an overview of what to be done.

Both circumstances and a certain pre-disposition toward

communalism on the part of members can be seen to have contributed to the community's evolution. A change in format which extended the length of most groups to one week, coupled with the acquisition of a secure setting in which to hold groups created a more extensive and profound common experience. As well, work on the land gave people a common goal. In a previous chapter, reference was made to Gardner's assertion that the early 1970s were a time when many communes failed, but that communards had tended to stay in rural areas to pursue a more individualistic form of alternative lifestyle. In fact, many of the people in the community went to the Kootenays as part of or in search of some kind of communal group, and the emergence of the community coincides with the period when the commune movement was dying. The intensity of Gestalt combined with a loose, non-residential organizational structure made the Gestalt community a happy medium for people who were still looking for close association, but at the same time were less inclined than previously to commit themselves to a full-fledged intentional community.

## GESTALT AND THE COUNTERCULTURE

There were a number of innovative therapy approaches which might have been acceptable to the counterculture strictly from the standpoint of not being part of "the system", but in the Kootenays, the therapy of choice was, for the most part, Gestalt. This chapter explores the relationship between countercultural values and the popularity of Gestalt in the Kootenays (research question number 5), using the concepts of ideological work (Berger, 1980) and emotion/feeling work (Hochschild, 1979) as the basis for an analysis of that relationship.

Two of the people interviewed for this study were therapists who never lived in the Kootenays but who travelled there frequently to lead groups. Both no longer consider themselves Gestaltists, although Don Babcock is still in private practice. I asked each of them the question, "Why Gestalt; could another approach have worked as well?" Don Babcock's response was that when Bethal and Gestalt came to the Kootenays,

the community was given a vision, an ecological vision... and a growth vision. And when it sort of permeated the community, it released all kinds of energy from people.

He attributed much of it's appeal to the free-wheeling style of Fritz Perls, with whom he trained at Cowichan.

Fritz Perls was a very lively man and T.A. [for example] is very dull, the way it's presented...Gestalt doesn't burden you with a lot of knowledge; it attempts to bring out your personal wisdom and my personal wisdom and leaves us with it. So it has an appeal for

a lot of individualistically oriented people.

Joyce Routenberg travelled to the Kootenays with Bethal a great deal in the years before the Gestalt land became available, and she was quite definite in her opinion that there was something special about Gestalt:

The psychoanalytical kind of attitude was, you know, you sit there and tell me all about it. And you talk, and talk, and talk forever... it was again tied in with the old, the old way, the old society. And the Gestalt was new, well new in terms of our experience of it here. I think the thing that attracted people was the fact that it was so different and that they were able to get past barriers. And in the groups particularly, it was a replica; what was going on in people's lives actually, would happen right in the group. So you'd get a picture of this person or these people and their interactions just on the basis of how they interacted in the group...it brought out all the interpersonal dynamics. It brought out the very thing a person was experiencing in their marriage, or their social relationships - this would come out in the group. And they could get sort of instant feed-back on it in a safe place...real situations came up and there was a teaching of how to handle a situation. What could you do, you know, how could you work this thing out for yourself without dumping on someone else. So there was a teaching happening that was not only personal but interpersonal as well.

These observations suggest that Gestalt's attraction went beyond it's possible effectiveness as a therapeutic tool. Novelty undoubtedly played a role in attracting people to groups initially, but it seems unlikely that this was the sole basis for the mushrooming of the Gestalt community. I suggest that in addition to filling a need for counselling or therapy, Gestalt provided both a refinement of countercultural ideology and a vehicle for accomplishing

the ideological/emotion work required to live by that ideology.

#### Gestalt as Guidance System

As Gerald Kogan (1974) points out, Perls' Gestalt, especially in his later years, was "something more like a life-orienting philosophy rather than only a psychodynamic system of existential psychotherapy" (pg.3), and further, that Gestalt "is a psychotherapy which has considerable appeal as a personal guidance system" (p.105). In many ways, Gestalt and the counterculture were very compatible philosophically. By combining the themes described by researchers mentioned in the literature review, it is possible to arrive at a general set of beliefs which represent what I am calling the ideology of the counterculture:

1. Preference for natural over artificial
2. Tolerance of drugs and other forms of consciousness experimentation
3. Spontaneity and expressiveness, living for today
4. Non-possesive sexual relationships as the ideal
5. Importance of freedom and equality, even between children and adults
6. Suspicion of traditional North American society
7. Distaste for the acquisition of money and possessions
8. Interest in the spiritual realm, especially Eastern and occult traditions

- 9. Ecological consciousness
- 10. Avoidance of role differentiation
- 11. Self-reliance

Gestalt ideology was essentially a "psychologized" version of the counterculture's ideology, arising as it did in response to similar cultural forces. That is, in the same way that society in general was moving toward humanistic values, so was the field of psychology experiencing a humanistic revolution. Gestalt was a dramatic, flamboyant "third force" system, highly compatible with countercultural beliefs.

As Kogan points out,

...the literature of Gestalt therapy, like the literature of most other psychotherapies, has been heavily technique oriented; consequently, however unfairly or unfortunately, Gestalt therapy has often been seen as only a technique or a system of techniques...[and] even among the students of Gestalt therapy, philosophical considerations as such are often considered "bad" and categorically regarded as "mind fucking" (pg. 43-44)

Clearly people were attracted to the action of Gestalt, but along with the world-view implicit in the practice were the articulated principles outlined in Chapter 5. So the countercultural ideal of "natural is better", for example, was narrowed in Gestalt to a belief in the benefits of coming to know and accept oneself as one is, in the conviction that awareness for it's own sake is "curative". "Ecological consciousness" found expression in the holism that is central to Gestalt; the idea of organismic self-regulation was less formally stated in the assertions

that things (groups, relationships) developed "organically". The value placed on not being "uptight" was expressed in being "up front" (forthright) about thoughts and especially feelings, as not only a more comfortable but more efficient means of communication. The ideal of self-reliance was made much more specific at the interpersonal level through the principle of taking responsibility for feelings as well as actions.

#### Ideological/Emotion Work.

In addition to complementing and refining countercultural ideology, Gestalt practice provided a technology which aided the process of applying that ideology to everyday life. The terms ideological work and emotion/feeling work describe processes employed (either internally or interpersonally) when a conflict exists between what is actually felt, thought or happening and what is supposed to be felt, thought or happening in accordance with a particular ideological stance. These processes are not peculiar to identifiable groups, in that everyone makes adjustments in ideas, feelings and circumstances in order to get on with the business of living.

However, the need is greater and the processes more apparent and elaborate when attempting to live day-to-day by a set of values which is at odds with previous life experience. For example, if one comes from a middle class background, one knows a great deal about how to set-up a

standard nuclear family household, but not much about how to live in close quarters with a group of adults to whom one is not related. In Hochschild's view,

...we can think of ideology as an interpretive framework that can be described in terms of framing rules and feeling rules. By "framing rules" I refer to the rules according to which we ascribe definitions or meanings to situations. By "feeling rules" I refer to guidelines for the assessment of fits and misfits between feeling and situation...Framing rules and feeling rules are back to back and mutually imply each other. It follows that when an individual changes an ideological stance, he or she drops old rules and assumes new ones for reacting to situations, cognitively and emotively...Part of what we refer to as the psychological effects of "rapid social change", or "unrest", is a change in the relation of feeling rule to feeling and a lack of clarity about what the rule actually is, owing to conflicts and contradictions between contending sets of rules. Feelings and frames are deconventionalized but not reconventionalized. (p.567-568)

The counterculture's inclination to devalue the need for any social rules (other than those concerned with violent behavior), further complicated the process of "reconventionalizing". There was a certain resistance to formalizing relations, making it difficult to codify daily interactions and thus know how to respond. The Gestalt ideology and its accompanying technology offered a way to acknowledge and cope with the conflicts that inevitably arise in everyday life, without resorting to the strategies associated with straight society.

The "Gestalt prayer", quoted below, embodies the values of the counterculture, stressing minimum interference and maximum personal freedom and spontaneity:

I do my thing and you do your thing.

I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,  
and you are not in this world to live up to mine.

You are you and I am I; if by chance we find each  
other, it's beautiful.

If not, it can't be helped.

The relative "shouldlessness" of Gestalt ideology (relative because of a tendency on the part of adherents to assume that one "should" live by Gestalt principles), combined with the explicitness of Gestalt technology in regard to the conduct of relationships, provided a framework from which to strive for the ideal while taking into account the stress involved in that striving. Unlike much emotion work, the immediate goal of Gestalt practice was not to influence the type and direction of feelings, but to bring feelings into awareness. However, the ultimate goal was the same as that of all emotion/feeling work; to manage feelings, and to promote harmony between them, ideas and behavior.

## CHANGES IN THE COMMUNITY

This chapter addresses the sixth research question which concerns the factors contributing to the decline in Gestalt activity and the fading of the community. When the bulk of the research for this study was done in 1983, the consensus among the people I talked to was that Gestalt groups, as we knew them in the seventies, no longer existed. A major re-organization affecting the administration of the Gestalt land was underway, and I attended a meeting held on the land to discuss and vote on that re-organization. Of the twenty or so people attending the meeting, only four had actually attended Gestalt groups. Even the informal name "the Gestalt land" was changed to the Kutenai Growth Centre, to reflect the fact that Gestalt was no longer the common thread connecting the various groups and individuals using it for workshops. Although a feeling of kinship and community was still very evident among "old timers", the primary basis for that kinship was clearly no longer Gestalt therapy.

Beginning in 1976, a newsletter containing information on upcoming summer groups and various related activities was sent yearly (and occasionally more often) to members of the community. These newsletters chronicle the shift that occurred over the years from a mainly Gestalt to a mainly non-Gestalt orientation, as reflected in the lists of scheduled groups. The schedules do not give an exact picture

of which groups were actually held, since groups were occasionally cancelled or added after the newsletter was sent. However, they do reflect the interests of the community, and give a general idea of the shift away from Gestalt.

Table 1 reports three categories of scheduled groups. "Gestalt" includes general Gestalt groups as well as training groups. Groups classified under "Gestalt +" are ones in which Gestalt was combined with another therapy or spiritual approach, for example, art therapy, journaling, meditation, bioenergetics, or yoga. "Other" refers to groups which were mostly or completely concerned with something other than Gestalt, such as Sufi dancing, Neurolinguistic Programming, Tai Chi, or hypnotic regression.

Table 2 combines the categories of "Gestalt" and "Gestalt +", in order to make the trend away from Gestalt stand out more clearly. In 1976, 77 and 78, groups emphasizing Gestalt were most frequently offered. In 1979 and 80, the split was even, but in 1981 and 83 a complete reversal can be seen, with non-Gestalt oriented groups clearly out-numbering Gestalt groups.

Table 1  
Scheduled Summer Groups 1976 - 1983

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Year	Types of groups offered		
	Gestalt	Gestalt +	Other
1976	8	1	0
1977	9	0	5
1978	10	4	4
1979	5	3	8
1980	1	8	10
1981	3	3	15
1982	copy not available		
1983	1	0	6

Table 2

## Scheduled Summer Groups 1976 - 1983

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Year	Types of groups offered	
	Gestalt	Other
1976	9	0
1977	9	5
1978	14	4
1979	8	8
1980	9	10
1981	6	15
1982	copy not available	
1983	1	6

Changes were occurring in the community (echoing similar patterns in places such as Esalen), which contributed to the decline in group participation. Just as the community's growth reflected an overlapping of several social forces, so did it's decline.

Gardner (1978) concluded that "the children of prosperity... in many ways had trained incapacities for the communal experience...[they] were trained to think they were special, and their parents' values of achievement, individualism and privacy were more deeply planted than they knew". (p.251) The 20 year olds who dropped-out in the sixties and early seventies became, as the eighties unfolded, increasingly unwilling to live within the narrow limits of the essentially poverty-level lifestyle associated with non-participation in "consumer" society. For many there was a sense of wanting "something more", and not just in terms of income.

Working at a job had generally been something one did for as short a period of time as possible, just long enough to save money for the winter, or buy land or whatever. The dream that brought many counterculture people to the Kootenays was that of living some variation on the theme of a self-sufficient, rural, alternative lifestyle; working hard on the land, coupled with the stimulation of a flourishing alternative culture. In reality, most people had little hope of ever becoming self-sufficient and were forced to take seasonal and/or low paying jobs in order to survive.

(Tree-planting was a major source of income for many.)

I think it was difficult for people who had been socialized to be "upwardly mobile" to resist the desire to "be somebody", to do something other than plant trees for the rest of their lives, despite their intentions to live apart from the larger culture. A move toward re-adopting previously rejected values was evident in the Kootenays in 1983, as reflected in two major trends. The first of these was a mass abandonment of "voluntary primitivism" (a term Gardner attributed to one of the communes he studied). To live without electricity and indoor plumbing was rapidly becoming a quaint and unsupportable notion, and many people seemed glad to be able to use modern conveniences in good conscience. Secondly, many people went back to school, or started school or some other type of formal training, perhaps in massage or music, and those with skills were trying in greater numbers to seek long-term employment. The zeitgeist was changing, as were many of the situations which had prompted people to attend groups in the first place.

Many of the issues raised in groups were, at heart, concerned with freedom and were essentially amoral (though not immoral). That is, much of the conflict in people's lives arose from the stress of attempting to live by a new set of rules which, though vague, implied that one was free to do anything so long as no violence occurred. Notions such as loyalty, duty, and commitment were not relevant, and were

to a degree scorned as "shoulds"; one did the "right thing" because it felt right to do so, not because one should. If, as Gardner suggests, people were less able than they had supposed to completely discard the values with which they were raised, it seems inevitable that they would look elsewhere for ways to incorporate some of those "shoulds" back into their lives. Apparently, Gestalt offered a philosophy and a set of techniques which were useful for sorting out the issues of the counterculture, but which became less applicable as people's concerns shifted from social experimentation to seeking a certain stability in their lives. Gradually, more and more people seemed to gravitate toward systems which were more goal and/or values oriented than Gestalt, est and N.L.P. being two of the most popular.

In his discussion of the factors contributing to the growth of the counterculture, Gardner attributes much to the prosperity of the 1960s and the unprecedented opportunities it bestowed on the young:

...[the] prosperity [which] brought college for millions, and with it, new ideas, new criticisms, and new experiences with politics, drugs and group living. In a way such opportunities placed them atop a gigantic pyramid of striving, suffering and abundance built under them by their parents. It was planned to better prepare them for the future, but it also gave them a vantage point to reinterpret the future for themselves. (p.242)

To a large extent, that process of reinterpretation continued, for although participation in Gestalt groups lessened over time, the overwhelming majority of people I

talked to became involved with other aspects of the human potential movement. Even as people engaged in a process of re-incorporating some of the values they had rejected earlier, many still looked to some form of human potential training as a source of guidance. This would seem to indicate that the move away from Gestalt was not an expression of dissatisfaction with the process of self-exploration as such, but rather an attempt to make that process more compatible with peoples' changing needs. Although not everyone in the community embraced a new system, the number of people still interested in attending Gestalt groups was substantially reduced.

The self-help aspect of the community also appeared to change as time passed. Just as a welfare rights organization would cease to exist if it's members became self-supporting, people no longer needed to do-it-themselves in order to get what they wanted. In fact, for many people, low-budget became equated with low commitment, and was associated with earlier, less realistic "hippie" attitudes.

It's important to note that in discussing the changes that occurred in the Gestalt community, I do not mean to suggest that the community disappeared. There was no overt rejection of Gestalt, and as mentioned earlier, most of the people I spoke with felt that their Gestalt experiences had been positive. Interestingly, many of the people who "moved on" to other approaches did so in the company of other members of the community. Whether they became involved in

est, N.L.P. or various spiritual healing disciplines, there was a tendency for several members of the community to gravitate in the same direction, and for the various interests to overlap.

For many, the sense of community is still quite strong. This is particularly true in the Slocan Valley, where, in several instances, former Gestaltees have also been neighbors for over a decade.

## CONCLUSION

The existence of the Kootenay Gestalt community was clearly tied to that of the area's counterculture. The decline in Gestalt signaled a change not unique to the Kootenays, as all over North America the "baby boomers" reached middle age. Perhaps it was inevitable that Gestalt would be abandoned once the members of the community reached the stage in life where what was formerly viewed as a "copping-out" became "realistic". Nonetheless, during the 1970s the community carried out a noteworthy, if unplanned, experiment in community mental health.

It is this experimental aspect that makes the community more than an historical oddity, and its examination of value to the field of counselling psychology. It represented a substantial shift away from the standard way in which psychotherapeutic concepts and techniques are generally applied, in that (a) the community evolved its own helping network (including organized therapy groups, crisis management and therapist training) independently of helping professionals, and (b) the system of psychotherapy was applied not only within the confines of situations defined as "therapeutic", but also served as a form of world view or guidance system in everyday life.

As a helping network, the community's development reflected both necessity and philosophy. The counselling services available in the Kootenays, both private and

public, were few and far between. Consequently, those that did exist were so overwhelmed by the needs of the severely disturbed, that they were unable to offer much in the way of services, especially of a developmental nature, for the rest of the population. Added to this was a tendency on the part of the counterculture to view "establishment" agencies as fundamentally flawed, by virtue of their connection to a fundamentally flawed society.

Whether Gestalt, as practiced by the community, "worked" cannot be adequately evaluated in this discussion, but it is possible to say that there were no obvious casualties in the form of suicides or hospital admissions following participation in groups. Perhaps the issue of whether a particular approach is effective, as measured by changes detected through some sort of psychological assessment, is separate from the perception of change, or the ability to effect change, on the part of participants. To the extent that despair is related more to one's sense of control than to actual problem content, it's possible that for the members of the community, the responsibility they took for their own psychological well-being was as, or more, important than the effectiveness of any set of techniques.

As a guidance system, Gestalt offered a systematic belief system and a guide to the conduct of social relationships which were compatible with and able to supplement the vague guidelines of the counterculture. As Hochschild stated, many aspects of life were

de-conventionalized but not re-conventionalized, and Gestalt offered some of the benefits of traditional religion - fellowship, a common belief system and deeply moving shared experiences - without the trappings.

In the same way that the demise of the communes was less important than the changes brought about by their existence, the fact that people no longer use Gestalt as a code for social interaction is less important than the bonds that were created by that experience. That Gestalt is no longer widely employed by the members of the community is not necessarily an indication that it is somehow lacking as a therapeutic approach, but it may indicate that Gestalt in particular or all such approaches in general may be more suited to some developmental stages than to others. And perhaps it may be a tribute to Gestalt's ultimate value as a system of change that the community did not cling to it, but rather moved on to the next stage. Perhaps the lesson to be learned from the Kootenay Gestalt experiment was that the value in psychotherapeutic techniques lies in their ability to be absorbed rather than consciously (or self-consciously) applied in everyday life.

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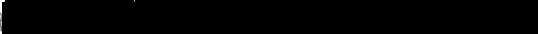
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