Gestalt psychology

Misunderstood theories

by: Neal Hermse

Edwin Rausch (1906–1994) was one of the most important representatives of the Gestalt theory of the second generation in Germany, associated with names such as Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Metzger. Having studied mathematics at the university of Bonn and Psychology at the university of Frankfurt he worked as a Professor and researcher at the University of Frankfurt. In 1978 he was awarded the honorary membership of the Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA). Rausch wrote a number of important Gestaltist contributions that are (psycho) logically very refined, but unfortunately his work has largely been forgotten. Many found these works difficult to understand. Seeing his mathematical background, he approached things differently; the level of abstraction in his theories is something that cannot be missed. The use of formal logic makes this literature difficult to comprehend. Maybe this is one of the reasons it had never been translated. Nevertheless, because of the superficial simplicity Gestalt theories have, it is easy to underestimate the significance of the theoretical ideas. It comes as no surprise that Gestalt theory is perhaps one of the most misunderstood areas of research within psychology.

The world surrounding us can be seen as an enormous puzzle made up of thousands and thousands of pieces. We are only able to grasp but a hand full of the puzzle pieces around us, these can be sounds, images, smells, etc. To Gestalt psychology the world we experience is more than the pieces it is constructed. To function on a daily basis and react appropriately to what happens to us we need an image of that reality. That image of reality is made of the puzzle pieces we that have and gaps that we "fill in" between them. The process of "filling in" the gaps of is based on expectations, which in turn are based on previous experiences. This is the core of Gestalt psychology.

Gestalt theory attempts to define and deduce the mechanisms that underlie the construction of our experience of our (daily) life. In doing so it combines complementary knowledge and insights from diverse areas such as mathematics, physics, philosophy and psychology. As many of the Gestalt theorists studied maths or were passionate musicians, they often analyse these abstract concepts with very simple geometrical or musical examples. This enlightens us about the very nature Gestalt psychology, often associated with high abstraction

levels. This area of research is interested in the relationship between parts and wholes. To illustrate what this actually means let's look at an example: everyone agrees that the parts of a story influence and shape the story (the whole), but it seems like the story also influences and shapes the parts it is made of. For instance, an old grandma sitting in front of a fire can be experienced as warm and friendly in a children's story, yet the same scene can be experienced as scary in a horror movie. Do This is just one of the questions that rise when approaching this subject.

In the hope of finding forgotten answers to Gestalt theoretical questions, the work of Edwin Rausch was the subject to my master thesis "Part–Whole relationships in Gestalt psychology". After two years of work, the most important pieces of his work were translated and summarized from German to English, making them accessible to the scientific community for further studies.