

Awards - Auszeichnungen

Marianne Soff

Laudatio for Gerhard Stemberger on the Occasion of the Award of the Honorary Membership of the GTA**1. Honorary Membership for Gerhard Stemberger**

On July 7, 2022, at the beginning of the 22nd Scientific Workshop of the International Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA) in Trieste and shortly after his 75th birthday, the Honorary Membership of the GTA was awarded to Dr. Gerhard Stemberger. He is thus the 19th honorary member of our Society who has been awarded this honor since 1978 (the first GTA honorary members were Wolfgang Metzger, Edwin Rausch, and Mănes Sperber).

When the GTA Board decided to propose this honorary membership of the Society to Gerhard, we knew that it would not be easy for him to accept the award; on the one hand, because he himself as a person does not like to be at the center of attention, and on the other hand, because he is still part of the internal active circle of the Society. Indeed, in many respects, he is still in the center of this circle, even if the official positions have gradually passed to others. Should we, if we had in mind the welfare and the external image of the Society, appoint one among the internal active circle as an honorary GTA member?

Nevertheless, we have persistently put forward the causes of our decision. And we are grateful that Gerhard finally agreed to accept the honor—he put it this way: He accepts the honorary membership not only as a sign of appreciation for himself personally but also for the “cause” for which he mainly stands, namely, Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (GTP). At the same time, this is to honor all those who in the past 40 years have contributed continuously and in an organized community-based way to the further scientific development of GTP, to establishing it as a state-recognized therapy, and to making this particular application of Gestalt Theory fruitful in everyday psychotherapeutic practice. I will return later to GTP in more detail. It should be emphasized, however, that in addition to Gerhard’s merit for GTP, there are other good reasons to grant him honorary membership in the GTA.

First, however, I would like to summarize some aspects of Gerhard’s vita and, above all, to name his most important teachers who, by his own account, had a particular influence on him.

2. Life, Learning, and Work

Gerhard Stemberger was born on June 29, 1947, in Innsbruck, the sixth son of Margarete Stemberger, a housewife, and Alois Stemberger, a trained toolmaker and police officer.

After graduating from high school, he lived in 1965–1966 as a “development worker” in the Amazon source area of Brazil in a village of the indigenous Kayabis. He describes as an impressive experience how people in the same place can live in completely different worlds at the same time.

After his return from Brazil, he first studied psychology at the University of Innsbruck with Ivo Kohler, the representative of the Innsbruck School of Perceptual Psychology, who is closely associated with Gestalt psychology. Kohler became internationally known above all for his experiments with reversal glasses—an opportunity for Gerhard to experience early on how easily one can turn another’s world upside down, but also how tenaciously the self-organizing forces of the organism ensure that such external interventions are corrected again. His second teacher in Innsbruck was Eduard Grünewald, with whom he studied depth psychology, accompanied by psychoanalytic self-therapy with Fritz Guem of the Innsbruck Working Group for Psychoanalysis.

The political spirit of the late 1960s led Gerhard to Vienna in 1969 and, in addition to an intensive political involvement in the radical left, to supplement his field of study with social psychiatry under Hans Strotzka and sociology under Eduard Rosenmayr, and finally to a doctoral degree in sociology and political science with a dissertation on Marxist class theory.

For many years, his research activities at the Social Science Department of the Vienna Chamber of Labour, which had already begun during his studies, focused on multidisciplinary research into the organization of employees’ working and living lives, also in an international context. For many years, Gerhard himself was the head of this Social Science Research Department of the Vienna Chamber of Labour, initially in the field of work and life-time structures in psychosocial, company, and social contexts and, since 1993, also in charge of psychotherapy, clinical psychology, and health sciences. Since 1992, he has also been a member of the Psychotherapy Advisory Board at the Austrian Ministry of Health.

In parallel to his research activities, he returned to his earlier psychotherapeutic interests during the 1980s. Personal experience and further instruction in Autogenic Training, Gestalt therapy, and neo-Reichian body psychotherapy were followed by training in GTP in the psychotherapy section of the GTA, with Hans-Jürgen P. Walter and Rainer Kästl as his main teachers. Since the 1990s, he has worked as a registered psychotherapist in independent practice, also as a

supervisor in helping professions, and is still working as a teaching therapist in specialized training for GTP.

From his subsequent involvement in the GTA and as editor of *Gestalt Theory*, new opportunities for international and multidisciplinary collaboration arose for Gerhard: Of these, he says, the most lasting influence was left by his collaboration with Abraham S. Luchins and Edith H. Luchins, with Paul Tholey, and with Anna Arfelli Galli and Giuseppe Galli.

3. Achievements and Merits—A Gestalt Theoretical Work

Since the foundation of the Austrian Association for Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (ÖAGP) under the umbrella of the GTA in 1992, Gerhard Stemberger has been a member of the ÖAGP board. In this function—together with Dieter Zabransky, Eva Wagner-Lukesch, and Brigitte Lustig—he achieved the state approval of GTP as a scientifically recognized psychotherapy method in Austria for the first time and developed further a training curriculum for GTP.

Added to this are his merits to the GTA, which has now awarded him honorary membership. Gerhard was a member of the board from 1993–2007, in the years 1999–2007 as the first chairman. From this time, which I myself witnessed “live”, I would like to emphasize above all his extraordinary foresight: Because, earlier than others, he recognized how important the cultivation of internationality and multidisciplinaryity is for our Society. And earlier than others, he used the Internet, which was developing rapidly at the time, for this international and multidisciplinary cultivation of contacts, and he designed and built the GTA homepage.

With all this, he gave important impulses for the further development of our Society and—even in times of crises and resistance—he worked very persistently for the continuity of the GTA and continuous international cooperation.

Gerhard's intensive contact with international colleagues has not only brought several international memberships to the GTA, but also extraordinarily fruitful collaborations. His persistent exchange with Abraham S. Luchins and Edith H. Luchins, with Max Wertheimer's son Michael Wertheimer, with Shelia Guberman, with Ian Verstegen, Ed Ragsdale, and many others has benefited our Society and the further development of Gestalt theory. Especially, Gerhard also promoted intensive and fruitful collaboration with Italian colleagues, with Giuseppe Galli and Anna Arfelli, Mario Zanforlin, Andrzej Zuczkowski, Ivana Bianchi and Ugo Savardi, Giancarlo and Elena Trombini, Lucia Lumbelli, Fiorenza Toccafondi, and others, which led us—now for the third time—to a scientific workshop at an Italian university: After the meetings of 2007 in Macerata and 2015 in Parma,

we met in Trieste in 2022, invited by Tiziano Agostini, Serena Cattaruzza, and Walter Coppola, bringing for all of us joy and highlight!

Gerhard Stemberger was also coeditor of the international journal *Gestalt Theory* since 1992; he served as Managing Editor in the years 2001-2013 until he handed it over to Fiorenza Toccafondi. Thus, in his scientific and publishing activities, he accompanied and supported the whole range of Gestalt theoretical publications from many different fields of work in the journal.

Since 2009, on Gerhard's initiative, there has also been the *Phänomenal—Zeitschrift für Gestalttheoretische Psychotherapie*, under the responsibility of a team of editors from the ÖAGP. The *Phänomenal* demonstrates twice a year the scientific anchoring of GTP in the whole breadth of its application. Gerhard is represented in each issue of this journal with several contributions of his own.

As a special preliminary highlight of the internationalization of GTP, a book edited by Gerhard was published in 2022, with eight original contributions in English by Austrian, American, German, and Italian psychotherapists under the title 'Essentials of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy' (Stemberger, 2022a).

All this was and is part of his own continuous research and publication activity based on Gestalt theory. The list of his writings since the first appearance of an article on "Genetic Technology and the Image of Man" in *Gestalt Theory* in 1992 is multifaceted and long (it includes >60 titles), a treasure chest for all those interested in Gestalt Theory, but of particular importance for psychotherapists!

4. GTP as a Science

The "cause" to which Gerhard Stemberger feels mainly connected and committed to is GTP as a science! For the awarding of the GTA honorary membership, Gerhard has wished that we bring up and honor the special features of this scientifically based psychotherapy direction in this context.

Indeed, the science of psychotherapy in particular is challenged in all "parts" ("approaches") that, according to Metzger (1954/1986) and Tholey (1980/2018), distinguish Gestalt theory as a whole (cf., also Soff, 2018; Stemberger, 2022b): the methodology/the epistemology/the systems theory approach/the psychological approach and the basic conception of man including the inherent ethics. In the context of this laudation, I take the liberty of drawing attention to Gerhard's contribution to each of the approaches.

Firstly, GTP is a special holistic methodological approach, in which the starting point is phenomenology. At central points, a force field analysis of the phenomenal total field of client and psychotherapist takes place. And in the researching examination of potential therapeutic changes, the experimental tradition of Gestalt

and field theory also has a place in GTP. In 2009, Gerhard made a significant differentiating contribution to the exploration of the overall psychological field with his multiple-field approach in psychotherapy (*Mehr-Felder-Ansatz*) (cf., Stemberger, 2009, 2018), which for instance was fruitfully implemented in application examples by Fuchs (2010, 2022) and Sternek (2014).

GTP is secondly an epistemological and psychophysical approach: It is based on Critical Realism and its special emphasis on the importance of the phenomenal world of each individual. It is this phenomenal world that can be explored together and made accessible to a force-field analysis, for which Gerhard's multiple-field approach has initiated a differentiation and fruitful further development.

GTP is thirdly to be understood as a system-theoretical approach, based on Gestalt psychology as a theory of dynamic interrelations (cf., Stemberger, 2022b, p. 21): The dynamic interaction of all facts located in the field and the emphasis on the goal-directedness of freely ordered events contributes fundamentally to the understanding of the psychotherapeutic process. In this perspective, people are seen as open and dynamically self-regulating systems in exchange with their environment, which of course is true for both clients and their psychotherapists. Furthermore, Gerhard Stemberger has pointed out that human beings (in the sense of Lewin, 1926) are to be understood as "systems in tension" (cf., Lindorfer & Stemberger, 2012).

GTP is, fourth, a psychological approach to therapy in which, among other things, the whole wealth of elaborated knowledge from Gestalt- and field-theoretical, phenomenological-experimental research since the beginnings of Gestalt psychology can be fruitfully implemented (cf., Stemberger, 2022b, p. 21). Many articles of the journal *Phänomenal* are dedicated to the work foci of different psychological researchers. Gerhard and the ÖAGP editorial staff make many (also: historical) psychological research contributions accessible again and show their currency and their importance especially for psychotherapy.

And finally, fifthly, GTP is based on a clear anthropological and ethical approach, which is probably most clearly expressed in Wolfgang Metzger's work *Schöpferische Freiheit* (Creative Freedom). Since 2022, this book is finally available again—on Gerhard's initiative! Here, one should read especially Gerhard Stemberger's Appendix "Psychotherapy and Creative Freedom" (Stemberger, 2022c), which emphasizes the following as an introduction and "translation aid" for psychotherapists:

- Since human beings are living beings and not machines that can simply be "repaired" and "reprogrammed," psychotherapy should be oriented to doing justice to the characteristic peculiarity of the living. Realizing that no change can be "made" from the outside or "forced" through training programs is not

trivial! Instead, a significant interpersonal situation with mutual influence of client and psychotherapist as a “boundary condition” for a development can lead to self-healing “from inner forces”, if it can be used for a confrontation and clarification of the often conflictual “inner forces” of the client. Gerhard has rightly emphasized that this actually depends on both participants (client and therapist) and on their interaction.

- According to Stemberger, Metzger’s “characteristics of working with living beings” and Rogers’ “therapist variables” should be supplemented by the “social virtues” researched by the great Italian Gestalt theorist Galli (2005): attentiveness (*Zugewandtheit*), sincerity (*Aufrichtigkeit*), curious interest (*Neugier*), inventive resourcefulness (*Erfindungsreichtum*), and courage (*Mut*)! This creates good conditions for the forces of self-regulation to develop.
- Metzger’s “basic forms of working with the living”, care, leadership, and struggle, which have already been examined by Kästl (2011), have been reclassified by Gerhard as forms of encounter and cooperation in psychotherapy: They are now placed under the overarching goal of working together for the client’s cause, gaining clarity about their forms of relating to self and others, and finding constructive cooperation forms.
- Finally, it must be emphasized that creative freedom depends decisively on how free of disturbing secondary goals and rigid habits a person can devote himself or herself to his or her tasks. Thus, for Gestalt theorists and especially for Gestalt psychotherapists, it is a matter of developing a factual attitude (*sachliche Haltung*) toward the tasks at hand. However, this does not require subordination, but rather the integration of one’s own needs into the overall situation. And especially psychotherapists are also called upon to practice sufficient self-care for the constructive and undisturbed fulfillment of their task—this insight following Henle (1957) and Galli (2005, 2017) has been particularly emphasized by Gerhard once again in his Appendix to *Creative Freedom*.

5. In Connectedness...

GTP is the field of application that has brought together a large part of our members for continuous and joint work within the framework of the GTA over the past 4 decades—and continues to be supported by a particularly active circle of GTA members within the ÖAGP. If Gerhard has his way, all of them will be honored as well by awarding him with GTA honorary membership. I know Gerhard would have very much wished to share the award with our mentor and friend Rainer Kästl, who passed away in 2020. I also know how sorely Gerhard in particular misses Anna Arfelli (deceased 2019) and Giuseppe Galli (deceased 2016), who, in addition to their wise humanity, gave him important impulses for

the further development of GTP and ultimately the Gestalt theory of the Berlin School.

Dear Gerhard, we congratulate you very warmly on your 75th birthday! With the award of the honorary membership, we connect the explicit wish and the hope that still further common work for the welfare of the Gestalt theory and the GTP as science and application will follow!

For the Board of Directors of the GTA: Marianne Soff, in Trieste, July 7, 2022.

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