Thank you for the privilege of being part of this important gathering and the opportunity to address with you some issues I regard to be of importance. I want to talk briefly, and I hope understandably, about three related issues: (1) Warrant (which is a more comprehensive construct than evidence), (2) Research (which is related to a coherentist form of warrant), and (3) the practice of gestalt therapy (which, in this context, is related to the research that affects public policy, a sense of best practice, and the regulation of psychotherapy).
Warrant

Warrant means “justification.”

So, the question:
Is the practice of gestalt therapy justified?”
Warrant is Based Partially on Personal Experience

Anecdote:
“Does gestalt work? Let me tell you about this one client…”

Testimony:
“I don’t need research to tell me gestalt works; I know from working with my clients that it does.”
Warrant is Based Partially in Foundationalism

When any principle of science or philosophical construct provides a foundation for the building of a theory, that is a form of foundationalism.

Example: Newtonian physics and Cartesian-substance dualism

Kick out the foundation, and the whole system falls apart.
Warrant is Based Partially in Evidentialism

The problem with this is that all evidence is limited and subject to researcher bias; we must deal in a post-positivist fashion with relative confidence levels, measures of error, and uncertainty.
Evidentialism

From the original report of Division 12, The Society for Clinical Psychology, of the American Psychological Association on Empirically Validated Treatments:

“From a research perspective, no treatment is ever fully validated; there are always more questions to ask (e.g., about non-specific effects or the essential components, about client characterizations that might make this treatment less effective than another).

To a certain extent, then, the decision on whether a particular treatment has sufficient empirical validation to warrant its dissemination for widespread clinical training and implementation will rest on the use of criteria which are somewhat arbitrary.

Because of the arbitrariness of drawing the line at what constitutes sufficient evidence for treatment efficacy, we have proposed two categories: well established treatments, and probably efficacious treatments.

We suggest that treatments that have not been established as at least probably efficacious be considered experimental treatments.”

(Chambless & Hollon, 1998)

(I will come back to this information tomorrow in my presentation on Single Case, Timed Series Research Design)
Coherentist Justification

Holistic/systemic/field-oriented understanding of causality

Web of Belief: justification is a feature of a system of beliefs with multiple touch points
Gestalt therapists’ claims of effectiveness have been largely anecdotal

Gestalt has been largely foundational, being based on philosophical premises

Gestalt has a poor evidence base

Gestalt therapy can benefit from a coherentist approach to research that produces multiple touch points and interacts with research data from different fields

Is gestalt therapy warranted?

The larger field is stuck asking if any given intervention or approach to therapy is “evidence-based,” but that is an inadequate statistic. We need to be better than that, and I believe we can. It would benefit our own field and contribute to the field of psychotherapy outcomes in general if we adopted this construct of warrant and addressed it whenever we write about the effectiveness or efficacy of gestalt therapy. So, IS gestalt therapy warranted?
Research

• In this respect, then, we need to embrace multiple methods while maintaining the philosophical perspective that will allow us to critically evaluate the results of our research and to apply them to practice.

• We need to be open to adjusting our theory if good research indicates that might be needed, but we need to be able to understand what makes for good research.

• We need to apply the scientific method with an informed understanding of what that entails.
Put another way, people need science to keep the philosophers’ feet on the ground, and people need philosophy to help number crunchers get to the significance of their equations.
In one version of the scientific method, which appeared in an article by Machado (2007) in the *American Psychologist*, it is a three-legged stool.

- One leg consists of systematic observation.
- A second leg is composed of mathematical analysis.
- The third resides in the critical thinking that considers what the implications of the numbers might be—science and philosophy providing significant touch points in a coherent approach to warrant.

In terms of philosophy, although there may be many kinds of philosophy relevant to psychology, such as ethics, the three elements of a contemporary philosophy of science that we need to consider are naturalism, critical realism, and post-positivism (I do not have time to expand on that statement, and I believe that as gestalt therapists we will be dealing with these issues as we proceed in doing research and thinking about what we are doing).
Research

The use of method presupposes clarity with regards to one’s research questions.

• Clinical Observation & Systematic Case Study Provide
  • Anecdotal testimony
  • Question: “Were the therapist and the client satisfied with the process?”

• Qualitative/Phenomenological Research Provides
  • “Texture and color,” related or correlated facts, and the raw material of theory creation
  • Question: “What was happening in this process? What did people do; what sense did people make of what they did?” “Does this set of data suggest a relationship between factors in the study?”

• Process-Outcome Studies Provide
  • A look at mechanisms of change
  • Question: “Which aspects of the process were most powerful, leading to change?”

• Single-Case, Experimental Design Provides
  • A look at causal factors in outcome for an individual person or group (considered against itself)
  • Question: “Was gestalt therapy, as practice by therapist A, the cause of change in client B?”

• Effectiveness Studies in Natural Settings Provide
  • Data on effectiveness in real-world conditions (external validity/data that generalizes)
  • Question: “Was gestalt therapy demonstrated to be as effective as CBT for depressed clients?”

• Random, Controlled Treatments Provide
  • Causal inferences in groups (internal validity, but may not generalize) through comparison with a control group
  • Question: “Was gestalt therapy demonstrated to be the cause of change among 120 people in the experimental group as compared to 110 people in the control group?”

• Meta-Analysis Provides
  • Observation of patterns across multiple studies & comparison of effect sizes
  • Question: “Was gestalt therapy demonstrated to be effective and efficacious across therapists in a region and/or across regions interculturally?”
What this involves is the consideration of how research is related to the formation of public policy, which in turn is related to the regulation of gestalt therapy. We are not at the top of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs trying to actualize ourselves; we’re at the bottom trying to survive. I realize that if we have to slit our throats—if we have to deny our values and abandon core philosophical commitments—then we haven’t survived, but on the other hand, if we stand off and demand that the world see everything the way we do, then we are lost in the fog of our own idealism.
Research and Public Policy

Let me describe the way things are moving in the United States and perhaps that will be a kind of window on trends in the larger field. In fact, the trend in your region may actually already exceed that of the United States.

- Practice guidelines are being created based on research evidence
- Guidelines indicate which kinds of therapy are indicated for clinical populations
- Guidelines used by state licensing boards as benchmarks for licensure
- Unless a gestalt therapist can point to research evidence he or she runs the risk of not gaining or keeping a license to practice
- Not only could gestalt therapy be disenfranchised, but individual gestalt therapists could be found wanting
It is not enough for us to create research and publish our findings.

We must be active in the larger professional fields that govern what we are doing as psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychotherapists.

We have to advocate, as a form of social activism, the evidence-based practice of gestalt therapy, including our expanded view of its justification in warrant.
The following is from my article in Gestalt Review, “C’mon Now, Let’s Get Serious About Research.”

“One person believes the other is serious when that person’s actions match his or her rhetoric or when non-verbal discourse is congruent with verbal discourse. Thus, for gestalt people to pay lip service to research without anything else, or to shrug it off in public while admitting that, well, yes, we have to get serious about research, is not actually being serious. We must GET serious, but how do we, as a field, do that?”
Five Indications Gestalt Therapists Are Serious About Research

- Associations of gestalt practitioners (both clinical and organizational) create research committees commissioned to find ways to promote and support research on the organizational level, either through funding, training, and/or the organizing of specific research projects.

- Individual gestalt training institutes or programs add training on research so that budding gestalt practitioners pick up on the positive attitude toward research and also get some needed training/orientation with the result that they can evaluate and assimilate research literature that contributes to better gestalt practice.

- Gestalt practitioners participate in actual research projects as the appropriate opportunities arise (and perhaps they also join various online gestalt research communities to learn more about such opportunities).

- Gestalt practitioner-researchers form solid, practice-based research networks that generate credible research projects that in turn are made known through publishing in peer-reviewed journals both inside and outside of the gestalt “conclave.”

- Gestalt practitioner researchers participate in research conferences both inside and outside of the field of gestalt therapy in order to cross-pollinate, infuse gestalt with increasing expertise and competence, and share the growing gestalt research tradition with the larger field of clinical psychology and psychotherapy.