

History of Gestalt Psychology

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the definition and fundamentals of another important theory in the history of psychology, that being Gestalt psychology. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Gestalt Psychology
2. Principles of Gestalt Psychology
3. Influence of Gestalt Psychology

1. Gestalt Psychology

Gestalt is a German word meaning the whole form, or the shape of something. You can thus think of Gestalt psychology as a sort of successor to functionalism.

As you learned previously, the theory of functionalism states that mental processes cannot be broken down because they are a flow, or a stream, of consciousness. Structuralism, on the other hand, states that mental processes can be broken down into their component parts.

Gestalt psychology says something very similar to functionalism. According to Gestalt psychology, we need to study thinking, learning, and perception as an entire unit, not as smaller parts.

Another term that you might hear in relation to Gestalt psychology is holistic, which means you can take the whole of something.

A common phrase in English is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts; the small parts don't tell you everything about something.

Gestalt psychology especially highlights the relationships between different things because the goal is to understand how separate parts relate to one another to create something bigger.

The important figure to remember in the theory Gestalt psychology is **Max Wertheimer**, an Austrian-born psychologist who worked in Germany, and later immigrated to New York in the early 1900s. A lot of Wertheimer's work focused specifically on perception; he used the idea of Gestalt psychology to explain things like optical illusions.



TERM TO KNOW

Gestalt

Form, pattern, or whole. Thinking, learning, personality cannot be broken into parts – must be studied as a complete unit, must understand relationships.



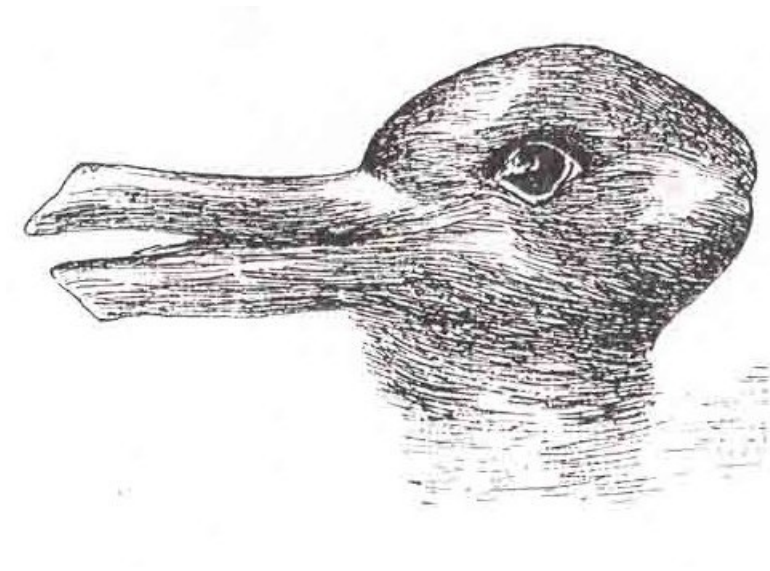
PEOPLE TO KNOW

Max Wertheimer

Founder of Gestalt psychology

2. Principles of Gestalt Psychology

Let's use the optical illusion below as an example to highlight the four basic principles that underlie Gestalt psychology.



1. Emergence: The first principle is emergence, meaning that complex patterns arise from relatively simple rules.

➡ **EXAMPLE** Think of it like a checkers game, in which the actual rules that describe how pieces move together are relatively simple, but when you look at the game as a whole, it's a lot more complex.

1. Reification: The second principle is reification, which is to say that you can construct more meaning out of something than what is allowed by your sight and perception.

➡ **EXAMPLE** In the example of the optical illusion, there's actually not much meaning that's being attributed to that specific picture, but you might see it as either a duck or a rabbit.

3. Multistability: The third principle is multistability, which means that ambiguous stimuli or experiences (like the one that you're seeing in the picture) can vary between those two different interpretations.

➡ **EXAMPLE** When looking at the optical illusion, you might see the duck one second, and the rabbit another. What you see can change.

4. Invariance: The fourth principle is invariance, which says that shapes can be recognized regardless of how they're turned around.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Imagine you were to take a block and turn it on its end or move it forward or backward. You would still perceive it as being a block. That perception doesn't change; it has a certain permanence to it.

3. Influence of Gestalt Psychology

While all of those examples stem specifically from perception, you can apply the Gestalt principles to other concepts in psychology as well.

➦ **EXAMPLE** When you have an insight, such as occurred in the famous story of "Eureka!," it tends to come all at once at an exact moment, rather than in pieces. You're taking it as a whole in how it all comes together. You can't break the insight down into its component parts.

This is just one example; as you will continue to see throughout this course, there are numerous ways in which Gestalt psychology influences the broader field of psychology and our understanding as a whole.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **Gestalt psychology** as a theory of psychology, stating that thinking, learning, and perception need to be studied as an entire unit rather than as smaller parts. The theory was founded by the psychologist **Max Wertheimer**, and there are four basic principles of Gestalt psychology: **emergence**, **reification**, **multistability**, and **invariance**.

You now understand that while a lot of Wertheimer's work focused on perception, the influence of Gestalt psychology extends across the broader field of study, and informs our understanding of psychology as a whole.

Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Erick Taggart.



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