A LINE ON LIFE 8/8/84, Updated 7/1/01 Organizing the World David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

We do not see events around us only as separate, discrete units. On the contrary, we tend to organize our perception into various patterns, seeing events as related to one another. Why do we do this? What factors influence this organizing tendency?

A group of psychologists – **Gestalt** theorists – believe that we have *inborn* tendencies to organize our perception of the world around us. In essence, Gestalt psychologists say that this organizing aspect of our perception is "*wired in*." We cannot avoid these organizing tendencies. However, certain factors influence how we organize the world around us.

On of these factors is **closure**. There is a tendency to *fill in gaps* in your perception. F-r ex-mple, y-u c-n re-d th-s sent-nce rel-tiv-ly w-ll, ev-n tho-gh th-re -re g-ps in alm-st ev-ry w-rd. As you have readily noticed, you fill in these gaps relatively easily.

I don't know if you are aware of this, but you have a **blind spot** in each eye. This is small area in the back of each eye and toward the nose, where the optic nerve leaves the eye to carry impulses to the brain. At this point in each eye, there is no sensitivity to light.

However, if you have a blind spot in each eye, why aren't there two little "*holes*" in your vision, when you look around? Some people may realize that, if the light from the object falls on the blind spot of one eye, the light from that same object falls on a sensitive part of the other eye. This is why you can still see the object and have no "*hole*" in your vision.

However, what happens if you close one eye? Shouldn't you have a "*hole*" then? This is where closure comes to the rescue. The brain automatically fills in that visual gap with whatever surrounds it. If you aren't convinced, look directly at the dot below with only your left eye. Vary the distance between you eye and the figure, until the star vanishes. At this distance, the light from the star is falling on your blind spot, and your brain fills in the area with the surrounding color. You can reverse the procedure for your right eye.



Another organizational factor is **similarity**. Objects in your environment that look similar tend to be grouped together. Look at the two following figures. How would you describe the one on the left? How about the one on the right?



In response to the right figure, you are more likely to say, "a triangle of dots with a square on each side," or even, "a Christmas tree between two small windows." In contrast, the left one is more likely to be perceived as "a six-pointed star," because all the elements are similar. (In addition, the organizational factor of closure helps you to see the dots as triangles.)

If they appear similar, people tend to be grouped

together the same way. This is one reason why many people group all nuns, marines, football players, hippies, policemen, or members of specific racial groups together. Since they look similar, people

mistakenly assume that they all shar e other characteristics like personality, intelligence, various attitudes and so on. The ultimate example seems to be irritated women who declare, "*Men – they're all alike!*"

Proximity is another grouping factor. Those objects that are closer together are more likely to be grouped together. Notice the dots below.



These dots are very likely to be described as "*a line of dots*." (Note that closure also influences this perception.) However, if I move every other dot half way toward its neighbor, how would you describe this figure?



Because of the proximity changes, you now tend to perceive this figure as "*three pairs of dots*." Many mothers warn their children not to "*hang around*" with playmates who have "*bad*" reputations. Why? Like the dots, children who play together are grouped together – leading others to perceive all as having the same negative qualities.

Understanding the factors that influence our organization of the world may help us correct mistaken perceptions. Next week, we will cover another organizational factor – contiguity – which is linked to our perception of causality.