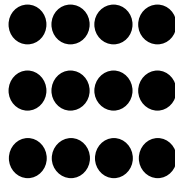# Gestalt theory of perceptual organisation

The Law of Pragnanz

Psychological organisation will always be as "good" as the prevailing conditions allow. (Koffka, 1935; p.110)

Gestaltists believed that perception was driven by an innate tendency to perceive the environment in the simplest possible way. For example, people tend to see this stimulus:
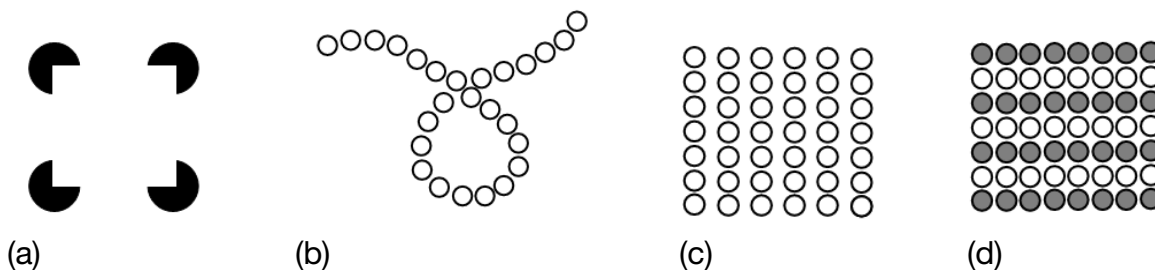

as three horizontal lines because this is simpler than perceiving it as twelve independent dots. The gestaltists believed that the human perceptual system organised perceptual information in predictable ways, according to their principles of perceptual organisation.

Gestalt principles

- **Proximity** – objects that are close together are perceived as a single object.
- **Similarity** – objects that are similar are perceived as a single object.
- **Continuity** – objects that fall into a clear line are perceived as a single object.
- **Closure** – when an object may be perceived as a simple shape with part missing, the missing part is 'filled in'.

Label the figures below according to the principle they illustrate.

(a)   (b)   (c)   (d)

Studies of gestalt principles

Navon (1977) showed participants large letters made up of smaller ones. For some of the stimuli the letters were the same (e.g. a large letter H made up of smaller letter Hs) and for some they were different (e.g. a large letter H made up of smaller letter Ss). Their task was to identify either the large or the small letters. How long they took to do this was timed. Whether the large and small letters matched made no difference to how long it took PPs to identify the large letters. However, it took them significantly longer to identify the small letters when these differed from the large letter.

Kinchla & Wolf (1979) did a similar study to Navon, but they investigated whether the overall size of the stimulus made a difference. When the stimuli were fairly small they produced similar findings to Navon's. However, when the stimuli were much larger PPs were faster at identifying the small letters than the larger ones.

What conclusions may be drawn from Navon's and Kinchla & Wolf's findings?

Commenting critically on gestalt theory

- The gestalt principles have mainly been investigated using 2D diagrams of simple stimuli like the ones above. Is this adequate for research into human perception?
- A scientific theory must explain the phenomenon it relates to. That is, it must say not only *what* happens but also *why* it happens. Does the gestalt theory of perception meet this criterion?

Comparing and contrasting gestalt with other theories of perception

	Gibson's theory	Gregory's theory	Gestalt theory
Top down (concept driven) or bottom-up (data driven) processing?			
Perception generally learned or generally innate (nature/nurture)?			
Role of stored knowledge in perceptual processes?			

Describe and discuss the Gestalt view of perceptual organisation (10 marks).

	Criterion	What must you do in your essay?	What material will you include?
AO1	*Describing psychological theories*		
	Selecting psychological research		
AO2	*Commenting on psychological research*		
	Criticising psychological theories		
	Comparing psychological theories		