Meaning Is Variable; Context Determines Meaning; Meaning Guides Behavior.
The assumption of interdependence underscores that the meaning of any stimulus is variable and is determined by the context in which it is embedded. Suppose I ask you whether the book you are holding is heavy. Your answer will depend on the frame of reference you use when making your judgment. Undoubtedly, the book will feel heavier if you’ve just picked up a feather than if you’ve just picked up a brick. This is what Gestalt psychologists mean when they say that perception occurs in a field of interdependent forces that operate as a unified system. These effects are even stronger when we consider social stimuli. Whether you judge someone to be tall, old, or thin will depend on who is in the comparison group. The same is true for personality characteristics: Honesty, intelligence, and attractiveness are all comparative judgments, influenced by contextual factors.

Gestalt psychologists also assume that meaning guides behavior. In Chapter 1 we noted that this is the hallmark of the phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology maintains that our behavior depends on the world as it appears, rather than on the world as it actually exists. Gestalt psychology is very phenomenological. It asserts that the perceived world, rather than the objective world, guides our behavior. Throughout the text, we will refer to these principles by saying that meaning is variable, context determines meaning, and meaning guides behavior.

The Whole Is Greater Than the Sum of the Parts. Because perception is characterized by interdependence and is influenced by contextual factors, a stimulus cannot be understood in isolation from its surroundings. This principle underlines the familiar claim that the whole is greater than (meaning “different from”) the sum of the parts. This maxim can be illustrated most readily with respect to a melody. A melody is comprised of individual notes (or elements). Yet, if we transpose the melody to a different octave, we still recognize the melody, even though all of the notes have changed. On the other hand, if we rearrange all of the notes, the melody is no longer recognizable even though the elements are still the same. In formal terms, we can say that a melody is a psychological whole that has its own reality, distinct from the individual elements that make it up. This is why Gestalt psychologists assert that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

In social psychology, this assumption has been used to understand the impressions we form of other people (Chapter 4). From the Gestalt perspective, our impression of