

Ingenious intention

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Abstract: Beginning with Goodman's definition of spontaneity and deliberateness, this article revisits Gestalt theories that reflect the tension between individual and environmental influence. As a way of conceptualising the more individually active aspect of this dialectic, the term intention is defined and explored, and differentiated from the phenomenological concept of intentionality. Subsequently, approaches for incorporating both intention and ingenuity into their own work are offered for practitioners to consider.

Keywords: person/world, spontaneity/deliberateness, intentionality, intention, experiment, ground.

Introduction

How much can individuals influence events as they unfold? This is a significant question for those interested in supporting sustainable and situated learning and change. Currently, clients are expressing a need to respond to their work and lives by developing new, high-level personal skills. They talk about experiencing a sense of the old structures disappearing, of needing to be sustainably creative, to inspire others, deal with impossible demands, navigate complex situations, recognise truth in a post-truth world, create satisfying and effective personal as well as digital networks, and more. They are looking to achieve significant results, and do so as quickly as possible. Collectively, we are experiencing societies that seem fractured, fraught with feelings of alienation and confusion and a sense of despair about the seeming inability to make things better.

Change occurs naturally. It can also happen because of deliberate choices made by individuals in the course of their lives, or through decisions made by others in their environment, for example work conditions and procedures and government policies. Either way, change affects both the individuals and the environment they inhabit, and is the result of a whole-field negotiation. While the negotiation is constantly ongoing, sometimes it feels as though deliberate choice is able to influence the direction it takes. At other times, it seems as though there is insufficient support in the field for an individual's or decision-making group's preference to prevail.

A Gestalt approach is defined by its emphasis on phenomenological awareness within a field of relational

experience. Its practices are ingenious; in other words, co-emergent, inventive and creative. Gestaltists are sometimes reluctant to work towards specific goals, understanding the value of an approach that emphasises co-emergence, and honouring the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970). Nevertheless, by contracting to work therapeutically or facilitatively with individuals or groups, practitioners are undertaking to aim towards some desired end, however nebulous. In recognition of the demands experienced by clients who are looking to achieve a specific result at speed, and in complex and challenging environments, it seemed important to attempt to identify the particular contribution a Gestalt approach could make towards meeting these needs, while continuing to maintain the power and integrity of its underlying philosophy and principles.

Given or made?

In the dynamics of exchange between people and their settings, how much may be decided, and how much must be discovered? Gestalt practices offer an opportunity for resolutions to be reached that are not confined by previous assumptions or expectations, but open to new, unforeseen possibilities, emerging from contact in the moment. So, if 'there is no function of the organism that is not essentially an interacting of the organism/environment field' (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951/1992, p. 400; hereafter PHG) then is it at all useful to consider the potentialities of self as distinct from what is available in the field?

Yet an individual's felt experience is, on some occasions, that of acting on the environment, and on others, having the environment act on us. We perceive

ourselves as making an impact on the world, for example when biting into the traditional Gestalt apple. At other times, it seems as if the world is acting on us, like when a train is late, or when we get caught in a shower of rain. Heidegger used the term thrown-ness to describe this perceived randomness of being in the world, and recognised that it can evoke deep anxiety (Melchert, 2014).

Gestalt theorists have used different terms to illustrate this contrasting dynamic. Goodman (PHG, 1951/1992, p. 376) identifies spontaneity and deliberateness, Philippson talks about Autonomy and Spontaneity (2001, p. 35) and Denham-Vaughan (2005) names a dialectic of 'Will and Grace'. Wollants (2012, p. 9) uses the terms 'person-referring' and 'environment-referring' to describe those different forces. Framing the opposites in this way, recognising different aspects of the total field as belonging more to either person or environment (while understanding they are at the same time equivalent members of a whole), offers a focus that is particularly relevant for this exploration of learning and change.

In order to express the experience in language, it is necessary to define and name what then may seem like two opposing polarities. Yet while either side may be experienced distinctly in the moment, it is essential to avoid falling into the trap (and error) of duality. Even as one side comes vividly into foreground, the other is inseparably present behind, available, influential and ready. Wollants emphasises that, 'whether environment- or person-referring forces are involved, both person-related and environmental conditions operate' (2012, p. 9). Hegel used the term 'dialectic' to capture the synthesis of opposites into a whole that contains and transcends both (Melchert, 2014), and it is with this attitude that the discussion which follows is undertaken, hoping to overcome, or at least sidestep the difficulties inherent with language, and offer some further understanding that may support practitioners to work effectively with each aspect of the dialectic and to integrate the whole.

Intention and intentionality

The world and a person respond constantly to one another. With our limited language we may say that, when a person changes, the world changes in response and, when a person's experiential world changes, he or she must re-orientate, and therefore change. Yet the process is not so linear: 'the co-disclosure of the self belongs to intentionality' (Zahavi, 2005, p. 11).

This intentionality emphasises that 'consciousness is always *of* an object' (Fleming Crocker, 2009, p. 20). While the word has a number of possible interpretations, the definition chosen here follows the

assumption that 'intentionality in phenomenology does not mean *purpose*; it signals the aboutness of experience' (Brownell, 2010, pp. 82–83). Less cause and effect than a mutually unfolding process...

Yet this definition has been expanded. From a philosophical standpoint, Toadvine writes:

Merleau-Ponty reinterprets the phenomenological concept of intentionality, traditionally understood as the recognition that all consciousness is consciousness *of* something. Following Husserl, he distinguishes the 'act intentionality' of judgments and voluntary decisions from the 'operative intentionality' that 'establishes the natural and pre-predicative unity of the world and of our life'. (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2016, n.p.)

While 'act intentionality' is close to it in meaning, the preferred choice of name for the experience being explored here is intention. Intention may be defined as an energy that has a similar quality to deliberateness (Goodman), autonomy (Philippson), 'Will' (Denham-Vaughan), that which is person-referring (Wollants). Intention here has a tentative quality, implying a willingness to negotiate rather than impose or drive-through a course of action.

Moral philosopher Elizabeth Anscomb (1963) has written a definitive exploration of intention. She connects it with an experience of 'I want' and observes that an intention is necessarily for the future, and may not actually be achieved. Then how might intention be understood from within a framework of Gestalt theory?

Intention and Gestalt

Goodman describes 'the stages of an act of self' as 'a potentiality that in contact becomes actual' (PHG, 1951/1992, p. 375). During this process, 'possibilities are reformed into a new figure emerging from the ground of the potentiality: the self experiences itself as identifying with some of the possibilities and alienating others' (ibid.). When a figure becomes fully developed, other potentialities fall away and the cycle (of self, world, contact, experience, life) moves on. The participant is left having discovered something about the world that is taken into the next encounter.

Goodman identifies three what he called 'partial systems' (ibid., p. 371) within this unfolding of self: the id, the ego and the personality. The beginning stage is often referred to as 'the id of the situation' (Robine, 2015; Francesetti, 2016) and is the point at which the 'intermingling intentionalities' (Ricoeur, 1987, p. 215) begin to constitute. Of the ego aspect, Goodman says, 'deliberate limitations are imposed in the total functioning of the self, and the identification and alienation proceed according to these limits' (PHG, p. 379). Priorities and preferences can be identified

and choices made: the person and the world perhaps become most distinct from one another in this process. This is when the possibility for intention is likely to become operative.

Describing the personality partial system, Goodman defines it as, 'the assumption of what one is' (PHG, p. 382), the partial system that carries the imprint of what has gone before into the future. In this way change can be more fully integrated over time and remain sustainable. As each gestalt is lived, there is a negotiation between the self and what is available in the environment. Some of the facets of the negotiation will be out of awareness, and others will open to intention. If this is the case, then where does the intention come from? In the sense that we understand it, the impulse emerges from an ongoing situation or (more likely) a series of situations, and is further developed over time. It is formed and shaped in a whole series of interactions, so belongs to the structures of ground (Wheeler, 1998).

Solid ground

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) uses the term sedimentation as a metaphor for the build-up of experience that, in an individual, takes the form of habitual, characteristic responses, and in a family, group or organisation is the customary culture and style. Philosophers recognise that 'the acquired habits and the sedimented choices of our lives have their own inertia' (Toadvine, 2016). Gestaltists may prefer to think of inertia in this sense as being the weight of a ground that supports and sustains individuals and institutions.

In today's world, perhaps tradition and routine may counterbalance the tendency for constant, rapid change, and be a support for this valuable connection to a substantial ground. Spagnuolo-Lobb (2016) recognises the establishment of firm ground as an appropriate alternative to the constant movement of aggression for some people in today's more fractured environments (see point 4 below for further discussion of aggression). In these circumstances, practitioners may consider highlighting what is stable and enduring rather than what is novel, although, because figure and ground are a dialectic, we do not have to preference one over the other as both are always available.

Implications for practice

So far, a number of polarities or dialectics have been mentioned:

- Several different examinations around what Goodman called spontaneity and deliberateness have been referenced.
- The dialectic of person and environment has been used in an exploration of the use of intention.

- The dynamic between figure and ground has helped illustrate how new experiences are integrated over time and become sustainable.

This non-dual understanding, the ability to hold two seeming opposites at the same time, is an aspect that differentiates Gestalt from other approaches, and is a basis for what Gestalt has to offer to clients seeking situated and sustainable learning and change.

In client work, and in life generally, situations occur in which a clear understanding and course of action is not yet recognisable because there is so much that is new or complex involved in them. Here, the application of the phenomenological and dialogic methods that are at the heart of Gestalt practice demonstrates their value. In other situations, when there is a desired end, it is possible to work with intention as a way to achieve it.

Having defined intention as a way to move towards what a person (or an environment, for example, a business, hospital or school) wants to achieve or become, then how can Gestalt practitioners help their clients move forward in a longer-term, sustained way that takes account of the broader context? A lot of it is what we do already.

1. Desire and capacity for change belong to the environment as much as to an individual

To say 'I want' is, in a way, to demand something from the environment. Our (the authors') experience is that when we ask people if there is some aspect of their current experience they want to develop, they generally find something. What they identify can be very new, they may look surprised as they begin to describe it, or it may be already well-formed. Yet, where does the desire come from? It may be useful to think of it as arising from interaction between person and environment, in the context of a sedimented landscape formed over time.

Then to say 'I want' is to articulate a desire that belongs to the situation. In our individualist culture, it is easy to consider that flair, talent, capacity or effectiveness belong to an individual, yet it can only be manifest if the environment allows (Roberts, 1999). For example, in a coaching context, Barbara asked for support because she felt her particular talents were not recognised in her work environment, and that she experienced frustration and a diminished sense of self worth as a result. Her people-orientated approach did not fit with the culture of command and control that was developing in her workplace as the result of a reorganisation. Initially, Barbara made some attempts to influence the prevailing attitudes, but eventually realised she would have to leave, so beginning a process of fear, grief and building resources that accompanies such a life change.

Development approaches often concentrate solely on the individual. A Gestalt perspective suggests that a focus on the family, social group, work team, or other context might bring more sustainable results. More about this follows in point 3.

2. An 'enabler' can facilitate the process of development

Change happens naturally. People usually only seek help when they are either experiencing problems or else want to achieve something novel or challenging. What, then, can a therapist, coach, consultant, teacher or even a manager or parent offer to facilitate the process for them?

The dialogic attitude and phenomenological, field theoretical approach of Gestalt is, of course, the foundation of what is on offer. Yet, the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky may suggest a different but compatible perspective. While not specifically identified as being a Gestaltist, his work was influenced by Goldstein and Lewin and seems compatible with Gestalt thinking. Although his focus was child development and education, what he says appears to hold true also for adults in learning situations. His notion of a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) describes the potential for learning and change available in a situation. For him, the role of the 'facilitative other' or enabler was crucial for achieving greater progress in the learning situation. That role was to calibrate the level of ease and/or difficulty so that the learner develops as much as possible, but is not overwhelmed and therefore experiences a sense of failure. From a Gestalt point of view, this may be described as the balance of challenge and support (Mackewn, 2013). It also reflects Zinker's (1978) suggestions for grading of experiments.

Setting an intention involves taking a risk. It is possible to fail. An enabler can provide support and consolation amidst the inevitable ups and downs of a substantial change process.

3. The design of an enabling environment

Learning takes place in many different situations. Each encounter with 'other' offers a potential for something fresh to emerge. The presence of the enabler can provide an opportunity for a 'safe emergency' (Polster and Polster, 1973, p. 235), a space in which it is possible to experiment with new ways of being and behaving. But the wider environment can offer a context for learning and change too.

Gestalt practitioners are skilled at designing experiments that provide a client with an opportunity to try out new ways of engaging with the world in the moment, either intrinsically in the dialogue, or in a more structured set piece. A client may be encouraged to try out being more authoritative in a coaching

session for example, or a facilitator may set up a mock interview situation in a group, using group members to take on different roles in order to provide an individual with the opportunity to 'rehearse' how they might negotiate an anxiety-provoking situation in the future.

It may be useful for clients to be supported to use 'environment-referring forces' as they experiment with new behaviours in their day-to-day lives. For example, Charles, a psychotherapy client, had suffered from periods of what he called depression for all his adult life. When feeling good, he enjoyed connecting with others, and was confident and gregarious. During his low times, one of the things he found most difficult was interacting with people. Over the years, he had developed many strategies for supporting himself in social situations during his periods of depression. They involved attending to posture, breathing and positive self-talk. Yet he had never tried negotiating support from the other people with whom he was involved. Naturally, when someone is feeling isolated and alienated, it is difficult to reach out. Yet Charles felt he could, in some circumstances where the people he was with were reasonably familiar and trusted, have ready a formula of words to explain what was going on for him or, at least, provide an explanation for any perceived difference in his behaviour (which was a source of anxiety for Charles). Having tried this out a few times in appropriate settings, he found that people were more than willing to be supportive. In individualistic Western society (Kapadia, 2008), it is easy to overlook the influence of the environment on the unfolding of a situation and forget that it is always coherent and responsive (although not always able to provide everything an individual might desire).

4. Aggression and deconstruction of no longer useful ways of relating

While change involves engaging with the environment to co-create something new, it also requires the disposal of what is no longer useful. Traditionally, these dynamics have been called aggression and destruction. Perls used the term aggression to describe the relationship between person and environment. In his book *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, originally published in 1947, he writes, 'The relations which exist between individual and society, and between social groups, cannot be understood without considering the problem of aggression' (1992 edition, p. xvii). Incidentally, he writes this in a section named 'Intention'. Later in the same passage, he goes on to say that he 'became more and more convinced that there was no such energy as aggression, but that aggression was a biological function'. Certainly, in the days following the Second World War, aggression would have been in the forefront of people's minds. While there is hardly less

aggression of this type in the world today, the Gestalt community tends to emphasise the more generative and relational aspects of interaction between self and other (Staemmler, 2016).

In his exploration and re-framing of the founders' approach to aggression, Staemmler (2009) identifies the distinction between what neuroscientist Panksepp describes as the RAGE system and the SEEKING system. (Capitals are used to denote that the words have a particular contextual meaning.) SEEKING is a movement outwards motivated by curiosity and excitement, not hostility, which is identified more with the RAGE system. This distinction is helpful because, while the natural inclination of the human to turn outwards is acknowledged, the different emotional timbre and relational approach that characterise each of the systems is highlighted in a way that offers a deeper understanding of the dynamics involved, differentiating between engaging with the world in order to destroy some aspect of it (RAGE) and reaching out in a spirit of curiosity and mutual participation. Expressed in more everyday terms, it is not necessary for someone to lose in order for someone else to win.

While Perls focused on aggression and the destruction of the environment by the individual in order to gain nourishment, the gentler SEEKING emphasises the satisfactions of discovery and novelty. It is important, though, to remember that there is a deconstructive aspect to profound change, and that it works both ways, affecting both individual and environment. There is an equivalent curiosity and excitement towards the individual coming from the environment. While this is often experienced as affirming, it is also true that sometimes a negative response from the environment can feel shattering. At a simple level, to say 'I want' opens the possibility of failure. Yet success also brings a new way of relating with the world and, perhaps, a sense of transformation for the individual. This is how situated, sustainable change can be differentiated from merely learning a new skill.

5. Integration over time

Some single interactions can have a profound effect, particularly in a therapy context. Yet change resulting from intention is more often built in a series of encounters, both 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' in terms of how much they support a person to move towards that particular intention. Schoenberg and Feder (2005, p. 231) assert: 'More often than not, it is necessary for an awareness to be experienced numerous times for it to "stick"'. Where the need for speed is significant, the frequency and intensity of exposure to the necessary learning environment can be increased either in the natural course of events, or else by designing and implementing experiments.

In the light of experience, some intentions may be reviewed, refined or abandoned entirely. In any particular interaction, a choice could be made to prioritise one intention over another. For example, I (Gerrie) am choosing to spend the time I have available now to write this piece and, by doing so to develop my intention to bring my discussions with Piergiulio into the wider Gestalt world. Another possibility might have been to read the Italian novel I am slowly working through, with the help of a dictionary, so as to learn that language, which is another of my precious intentions. Curiously, these aims do have a connection: both help build communication with others who share my interest and excitement.

Conclusion

A Gestalt approach has the power to integrate ingenuity, the discovery of what is not yet known, and intention, the opportunity for an individual to make aware choices about where to direct available energy. Perhaps the Gestalt use of experiment most fully explores the possibilities of this phase for intentional direction and development. Yet individual choice is always bounded by the possibilities available in the field.

Being human means being involved. Living in both a phenomenal world and a world of atoms and molecules, each individual is both unique, and an indivisible element of a wider whole. The world makes demands on the individual, and the individual makes demands on the world. Spagnuolo-Lobb and Lichtenberg (2005, p. 30) describe a power that 'organizes autonomously, representing neither a biological impulse, nor a social drive but rather constituting the creative expression of a whole person'. This is the spark of generative energy that creates movement and change. It is both a privilege and a duty that the choices each of us makes contribute to how the future takes shape.

While it is possible to feel daunted by the responsibility, when it is framed in that way, it may be reassuring to remember that our impulses and choices are not exclusively selfish, because they co-emerge through many units of experience. When they (we) develop, it is because there is support in the field. The Gestalt understanding of field dynamics is one of its important contributions to current knowledge.

Our original intention was to frame a dialectic, a transcendence of polarity. With figure and ground, we have recognised the importance of stability and sustainability, particularly in the context of accelerating change and the sense of fragmentation in today's world. Yet it is also possible to do this while appreciating the creativity and potential for innovation in our interactions. The uncertainty and anxiety of what Heidegger calls thrown-ness is mediated by the

‘living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life’ recognised by Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. 53), who goes on to claim that, ‘[O]ne’s own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism’ (p. 209).

Yet, perhaps, above all, human beings are meaning-makers. So we may achieve both depth and transcendence by considering Ricoeur’s question: ‘what does it mean to speak of willing, of acting, of motive, or of situation?’ (1987, p. 214).

Of course, the answer to this question changes in every moment.

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