An organisational self: applying the concept of self to groups and organisations

Marie-Anne Chidiac and Sally Denham-Vaughan

Abstract: Looking beyond the traditional contributions of Gestalt theory to groups and organisations, this article shows how the complex and often misunderstood theory of self in Gestalt psychotherapy theory can also be meaningful at a group and organisational level. We begin with framing a common understanding of the theory of self as relational, emergent within a given field or situation, and accompanied by the self structures of id, ego and personality. The article then addresses each self structure as it applies to groups and organisations and shows how this conceptualisation of self provides particular insights into organisational behaviour and an illuminating framework from which to create organisational interventions.

Key words: theory of self, selfing, self-functions, organisational consulting, groups.

Man is immortal; therefore he must die endlessly.
For life is a creative idea;
it can only find itself in changing forms.

(R. Tagore,1996)

It is in our very being and expression of our personal uniqueness that we creatively reveal our strengths and also our vulnerabilities. Both *who* we are and *how* we are gives us our identity and designates our impact on the world; together these constitute what we call 'self'.

It is how this core concept of 'self' is formulated within Gestalt theory that sets us apart from other modalities, both as Gestalt psychotherapists and OD consultants. We are an aesthetically-informed discipline, working with a radically relational, fluid and dynamic view of self. Yet ironically, this aspect of theory is commonly ignored or underplayed in many training programmes, so newcomers to Gestalt struggle in comprehending the concept and its application to practice.

We would like to be explicit however; both authors are absolute and passionate fans of the Gestalt theory of self. The concept not only speaks to us in our phenomenological knowledge of the world and ourselves; it is also a foundational theoretical tenet that illuminates our understanding of Gestalt and orientates our thinking and praxis.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in devising a programme to teach Gestalt concepts to organisational people, the theory of self was at the heart of our proposition. We had many discussions with other Faculty members (Ty Francis and Brenda Hales),

trying to prioritise those key Gestalt concepts and applications we judged most useful to organisational life. Throughout, we were led back to focusing on our distinguishing and unique view of self as process, formed as a function of the current situation or 'field'.

In reflecting on our personal experience as Gestalt psychotherapists, managers, coaches, and OD consultants, we found there was utility in applying the Gestalt concept of self not only at an individual level (the person), but also at a group/team and organisational level. We also realised that the structures of self in Gestalt (the id, ego and personality functions) were meaningful at a systemic level; they provided us with particular insights into understanding organisational behaviour and supported more discerning organisational interventions.

Within this article we wish to elucidate our thinking and demonstrate how our organisational programme has been developed around these themes. We will articulate what we believe is the added value of approaching Gestalt OD work from this perspective.

The Gestalt concept of self – a brief overview

The self can be defined as 'the system of *contact* at any moment' (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951, hereafter PHG, p. 11), so unlike other forms of psychotherapy, the self in Gestalt theory is not a 'thing' but a process. There is no self independent of the situation (or a given context), it is 'given in contact' (PHG, 1951,

p. 7). The self emerges from this changing ground and it does not exist prior to, or apart from, relationships with the environment.

Time and again however, we see trainees struggle with this model of a self as process, fluid in time, shifting and changing with each new experience. How does this fit with our phenomenological sense of an enduring 'I' across time? What is the value of holding to this level of changeability? Like all ideas that do not immediately fit with current paradigms of knowing, the concept of self in Gestalt is still debated and also often refuted.

The early Gestalt years focused on 'self as process' mostly in terms of figure formation, with little emphasis that assimilating and integrating processes are just as important in the overall process of contact (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993). There were suggestions that Goodman's view of self did not pay enough attention to the qualities of grounded-ness, cohesion, continuity, and identity. Tobin (1982), for instance, points out that our experience is very much one of continuity of self and denies this is at odds with Gestalt's phenomenological orientation. Similarly, Wheeler (1991) suggests that the early form of Gestalt therapy was 'figure-bound' in as much as it did not explore the structured ground or processes of people's lives. He writes of a 'relative tendency to isolate figure from considerations of organisation of ground' (Wheeler, 1991, p. 91).

Yontef (1993) writes that Perls et al.'s stand against the Newtonian thinking of self as structure rather than process was against attachment to a false self concept, not a stand against awareness of personnel wholeness (p. 375). In fact, Goodman did put forward a consistent aspect of the self that he called personality function – 'The Personality is the created figure that the self becomes and assimilates to the organism, uniting it with the results of previous growth' (PHG, p. 157). Yontef (1992) describes this as a slowly moving process that organises other processes. But more on that later.

In searching for an absolute answer to the question 'what *is* the self?' or 'What is the substance of the self?', many people overlook the amazing subtlety in PHG's ideas on self. Self as possessing *both* changing process and enduring features fits with our phenomenological knowing and also provides us with a powerful lens through which to view ourselves in a compassionate and authentic light.

Today, new discoveries in physics support PHG's insights on the importance of viewing the self as a process rather than substance. The nature and properties of particles in physics is determined by how they behave and interact with each other. Those processes are crucial to our understanding of the whole and of the nature of the world. In his contribution to process philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead, the early twentieth-century English mathematician and philoso-

pher, writes of process versus event ontology explaining that to some extent substance is secondary whilst events are the fundamental blocks of reality (Whitehead, 1929). According to Whitehead's notion, what people commonly think of as concrete objects are actually successions of occasions of experience. Similarly, the concept of self in Gestalt is not that of a core concept but one of a complex and fluid dynamic ontology.

Our view of the theory of self

This article is not about the theory of self *per se*, but how this concept can be enriching to our view of groups and organisations. Before extending the application of a controversial and complex concept however, it is wise to be clear in *our* definition of its terminology and key aspects.

Gestalt therapy, as pointed out by Philippson (2001, p. 37), is about relationship. Our sense of self emerges from our interaction with others and the environment. The self is therefore constantly changing and adjusting according to the situation within which it finds itself. It is fluid and dynamic, responsive to the environment and experiencing changing needs and goals as the situation changes.

The *purpose* of the self, however, is to organise this emerging and changing experience to make it meaningful. Within Gestalt therapy theory, this is achieved through the process of forming a figure against a background. Together, figure and ground constitute what is known in Gestalt as 'the field', and is sometimes called the situation (Wollants, 2007). Our personal experience (awareness), and our conscious experiencing of that situation (contact), are therefore always supervenient upon a particular situation and occurring at a precise moment in time: Now.

Organisation of the field in this way is termed the 'self-function' and is accompanied by the 'self structures' of 'id', 'ego' and 'personality'. These are different aspects of the self that are part of the ongoing process of self formation and destruction.

The id function

The id function is the starting point of figure formation. At first, it is a passive (perhaps better termed 'receptive') state, in which needs, wants, or interests are not yet in conscious awareness. We mean by this, that they have not yet been fully grasped and languaged. Thus emotions or physical sensations have not coalesced into forming clear figures of interest. The situation is largely undifferentiated, the self emerging and the dominant experience can be of confusion, tension, drifting, and disorientation. If I were entering a group or organisation, this phase might describe my initial sense of being overwhelmed, not knowing any norms or

groundrules, and lacking a sense of the culture. As id functions develop within the sequence of contact however, self formation begins to coalesce. Impressions of the environment strengthen and physical sensations start to fall into ground. PHG (op cit., p. 182), describe this as 'This is what is aware as the "given" or "Id of the situation" and it is at this point that we begin to consciously grasp our individual personhood within that particular world'. In other words, *I* start to gain a hold on what this particular place and moment in time means to *me*. At this point I start to make some sense impressions; there might be feelings of familiarity, memory, or alternatively, newness. I begin to edge towards naming these impressions and gathering them into bundles of information that signpost previous patterns of experience. We are just prior to the moment when I ask myself 'what does this smell, wallpaper or logo mean to me?'. (This second phase of id functioning is sometimes located in the early phases of ego functioning. However, since it is prior to languaging and, in keeping with PHG, we prefer to locate it as a phasic element of id functioning, and one that is particularly important in organisational/group life and often overlooked.)

The ego function

The ego function is the clear identification of a figure of interest and alienating of other aspects of ground. Put more simply, it is the choice we make in responding to our needs, wants, or interests. It is what we say or do, often involving action imperatives and a sense of 'knowing' or familiarity. It describes the moments when I start to ask myself and/or others those questions that I have decided are important. That is, I let go of any impressions of the wallpaper or logo, but decide that the smell in the hallway quite clearly reminds me of a restaurant with too many fried foods that I didn't like. I also decide that given how strongly this impacts on me, I make a choice in how I will respond to my dislike and therefore my course of action.

The personality function

Finally, the personality function is the enduring or slow moving aspect of self. It is our narrative or story and contains the meaning we have made from the accumulation of our experience. As such, it forms a ground which can organise all other aspects of self. If we wish to be truly open to emerging impressions and sensations, we need to be vigilant to the tendency of our personality function to organise experience in habitual ways whereby we behave in very predictable patterns, asking similar questions, making similar interventions, etc. This will specifically impact our healthy id functioning and considerably reduce our ability to be creative and in tune with the moment.

In practice, it is impossible to see these self structures separately; they are intimately intertwined in an indivisible and ongoing process through which we contact the world.

A systemic view of self

We have seen how our Gestalt concept of self provides us with a relational framework for interacting with the world, one in which we impact on, and are impacted by, what is around us. Furthermore, it takes account of emergent, out of awareness processes, as well as more conscious and enduring aspects of ourselves.

It is crucial to the structure of our programme that we hold theoretically that individual people, groups, teams, and organisations function in the same way. That is, they are also formed within a network of emerging relationships and depend on those relationships. They are also constantly changing and shifting as these relationships change. Groups and organisations, too, hold their history and narrative, the 'way things are done around here', which impacts what they choose to do or say about themselves.

At a group level, the dynamics, behaviour and effectiveness of a team are clearly dependent on the given situation. Is the workload intense? Are there worrying rumours within the organisation? Is leadership within the team being questioned? All these aspects of the field, and whether/how they are attended to, will impact the 'selfing' of a given group at that moment.

Thus the structures of self seem to be meaningful at a systemic level and can affect different levels of the organisational system (individual, group and organisation). These are summarised in the table below. These three levels are significant as they provide us with differing views and approaches to intervening in organisations and yet are, in true systems theory, interconnected. This means that any intervention at one level also impacts the other levels.

We will now elaborate on each of the self-functions as they apply to groups and organisations.

The nature of id

The id functions in a group or organisational context relate to those aspects that are out of awareness, covert, mysterious, and hard to articulate.

In a group this would typically include unnamed group dynamics, covert power struggles or undeclared alliances between group members. As group facilitators, the id functioning of a group is often palpable to a newcomer, visible through the ebb and flow of energy, confusion and even tension in the interactions between members. In these situations a variety of moderations of contact might be used to keep these issues out of

	Individual	Group	Organisation
Id	Sensations, feelings; could be out of awareness	Unnamed group dynamics	Unwritten rules, rumours; organisational uncertainties, covert power struggles
Ego	What I intend, do and say	The group's goal or task	Our mission statement, vision, strategy, policies, plans
Personality	My life experience so far	Individual's experiences of groups as well as the group history so far	History of the organisation, what worked and what didn't, our culture

awareness; for example humour can be used to deflect and distract from more difficult or dangerous feelings; desensitisation can be used to block our responding to temperature, smell, etc.

Our experience is that at times of crisis or tension, an organisation will often fall back to unwritten, arcane ways of being and behaving. Some of these may be quite aggressive such as competing for space, excluding individuals from communications, etc. These could be seen as the unhealthy result of the id functioning of an organisation. These rules are not communicated or made explicit, but will be felt or experienced. They form around the need of the organisation to respond to perceived danger or competitive threat from its environment and are often taken for granted as 'what successful/surviving employees do'.

Often, implicit rules emerge from the complex web of how people are managed, motivated or measured and yet are rarely acknowledged or explicitly recognised by management. A common example of an unwritten rule is the expected leaving time. Although 5.30pm is the close of day for most organisations, we often find that leaving 'on time' is perceived as not 'putting a full day's work in'. Sometimes, the right time to leave is only after the boss has left and how long one stays after hours is a sign of commitment and 'doing a good job'.

We also find that in flat organisations (such as consulting organisations) who pride themselves on not having a hierarchical formal structure and being 'team-based', there nonetheless exist unwritten rules of behaviour which define an unofficial hierarchy. These manifest in informal groupings (going for drinks after work) and complex circles of influence. The discrepancy between what is claimed and the reality of permissible behaviour/what is done, is a rich area for intervention and raising awareness.

The use of metaphors is a successful and creative way of giving expression to aspects of id functioning in a group or organisation. Stepping back from explicit plans/messages into metaphors, poetry or visualisation frees participants to provide the important 'felt sense' (id) of a group or organisation, rather than what is said *about* the team or department (ego). Thus a simple

exercise, such as asking senior managers to describe the company as an animal or object, often gives rise to a wealth of information about the organisation's id functioning. In this way we can surface what is implicit and in ground and yet impacting significantly on choices and how people behave.

Working to raise awareness around id functioning in groups and organisations is a key aspect of the work of any organisational practitioner. What is out of awareness and as yet unnamed is often where a lot of dynamic energy is stored. Whether or not it can be made available will, however, depend on a number of factors; principally, the amount of self support that individuals bring and also the degree of relational support that is present in the organisation. For example, when a manager displays clear favouritism to a few individuals in his top team whilst practically ignoring the contribution of others, it is often not wise to raise publicly awareness of such a group dynamic. Relational and support issues need to be considered and sometimes tackled through a number of one-to-one interventions before any explicit naming is actioned. How supported is the manager in hearing and taking in criticism in front of his team? In naming the prevalent dynamic, how safe do non-favoured group members feel in stepping forward? Do they believe this may make their jobs even more difficult rather than easing the situation? Have you as a consultant/facilitator built up sufficient credibility and trust that you can name potentially shaming issues without being seen as critical and/or unhelpful?

Properties of the ego

The second self structure relates to ego functions as they emerge in a group or organisational context. They can be seen in the group's goal or objectives or what an organisation 'says it does' and can be detected in mission statements, vision statements, business plans, performance indicators, and protocols.

The power of ego functioning is usually well harnessed in most organisations and sometimes pushed to the extreme through the application of measurements

systems. The dreaded acronym WYMIWYG (which stands for 'What You Measure Is What You Get') is a common business concept inviting organisations to set indicators to measure the performance of their processes and activities as well as financial results. The idea is that if you focus on a given activity, if you 'will it', then it will happen. To a certain extent, some results are achieved as people motivated through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) try to reach the set targets. However, the issue arises if those targets do not measure what truly needs to improve or be focused upon at a given moment; or more often that focusing on a part of an activity loses sight and harmony of the whole field, which can then become unbalanced.

Many companies spend large amounts of time and money improving the detail of performing aspects of their business processes. Pages of text and diagrams are produced to describe the detail of key processes in an organisation, how things should be done, agreed and decided. As most organisational practitioners know, this detailing of processes does not guarantee that all will run smoothly or as planned. Groups and organisations find themselves often stuck in patterns of behaviours and habitual ways in which they interrupt the effective carrying out of key tasks.

These patterns of functioning are referred to by PHG as 'loss of ego functions' (op cit., p. 223) or 'contact boundary disturbances' which interrupt contact (PHG, 1951). In preference to 'interruptions to contact', terms such as 'styles of contact' (Mackewn, 1997), 'modifications to contact' (Yontef, 1993), and 'moderations to contact' (Wheeler, 1991) have now been adopted. The application of such moderations to contact to groups and organisations is well documented in Gestalt literature (see Nevis, 1987; Gaffney, 2006). The cycle of experience and the moderations to contact are useful diagnostic tools much used in groups and organisations. Raising awareness of moderations to contact at a group or organisation level can be a powerful intervention as it highlights the discrepancy between the intent and the actual, the 'is' and the 'ought'. Within our framework, it can also provide a window to any discrepancies between the various self-functions; that is, between an organisation's emerging needs (id), what it actually does in response to this need (ego), and what it tells itself and others it does (personality).

In a large service company, a planning group responsible for identifying and approving new capital expenditure projects was found to be inefficient by many of the department heads who struggled to get new projects approved fast enough. Through a number of interviews and observation of how the team operated, it became apparent that much effort was going into the definition phases, detailing the how and what of each project. Yet this forward momentum ground to a halt at the moment of final decision-making. This behaviour of the team was highlighted by the organisational practitioner as a pattern. At first, the reaction was to justify the behaviour through reference to 'this is what we are supposed to do; thoroughly examine projects' (ego functions), but an underlying fear of moving projects forward emerged (id functions). It became apparent that the team felt wholly accountable for the success or failure of the project and yet had little input into the delivery process. The team was being measured and rewarded on how well the projects they approved were performing but as they had no direct ownership of the implementation stages they lacked confidence in their judgements. Slowing the process down, clarifying accountabilities and involving the planning group with the early stages of the delivery process ensured join-up of id and ego functions within the organisation.

In the above example, we are using self-function as diagnostic of particular aspects of the organisational self that are calling for attention. In this case it is clear that both id and ego functions are implicated in the failure to implement tasks. The approval process for projects was clearly articulated and known to all in the organisation (ego functions). In practice, however, this was effectively sidetracked by unattended to and unawares fears (id functioning).

Similarly, when carrying out a change programme within an organisation, we feel it is usually necessary to carry out an assessment of the reward and recognition processes in the company. These, more than others, often present an organisation with considerable discrepancies between what is said about recognising and rewarding employees (ego), and where/how people feel they are mostly valued (id). We believe that people in organisations have needs for relational support (Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2008), with ongoing longings for mirroring, idealisation, and twinship. These needs for support are frequently overlooked, with rewards focussing on pay and/or promotion. We formulate this as privileging ego functioning over other aspects of the self and suggest that it foolishly ignores the power of the id.

Functions of the personality

Finally, the personality or narrative function is also expressed in an organisational context. This concerns how the story, or history, of a group or organisation has shaped its distinct rules, values and way of being. This is where we can most clearly see and articulate the identity

of an organisation and detect the imperatives that will define what is possible.

This aspect of self-functioning is often described as the culture of an organisation, the 'way things are done around here'. More than that however, awareness of the personality functioning of a group or organisation is about understanding the *why* of the prevailing culture. In referring to the self of an OD practitioner, Cheung-Judge (2001) writes, 'owning the self means devoting time and energy to learning about who we are, and how issues of family history, gender, race and sexuality affect self-perception'. The same can be said about raising awareness of the personality aspect of groups and organisations. Owning this aspect of self for a group or organisation is bringing to light the narrative, the common experiences of a community of people and showing how these have impacted existing patterns of behaviours, rituals, traditions, and shared meanings.

At the start of a change programme, an American management consulting boutique I (M-AC) used to work for undertook an awareness process with each of its clients. The process was referred to as creating the 'horse blanket' of the organisation, in the way of American-Indians who recorded significant stories or events by hand-weaving them into their horse blankets. Depending on the scale of the intervention, one or more 'blankets' were gradually built and significant themes emerged which started to shed light on areas of low energy or poor performance in the organisation. A similar, though perhaps less evocative intervention is used by SD-V in physically sculpting and constellating a 'timeline' of the organisation's history. As we know through the Paradoxical Theory of Change (Beisser, 1972), such an awareness-building intervention leads to increased mobilisation, and change actions often naturally result.

Disregarding this aspect of self-functioning in organisational work is akin to working blind for an organisational practitioner. In particular, long-established and successful businesses tend to have a striking and often overwhelming sense of their history that gets reflected in every detail of that organisation from the set-up of the parking slots to the layout of the office desks. Significant events in a group's past create a shared history, a sense of community and belonging. The personality function of a group or organisation is unifying and refers to the essence – the consensual reality of the organisation, what it is like to work there, how people deal with each other and what behaviours are expected. The narrative does not belong only to those individuals who are there at a particular time but is owned by the group, department or company as a whole.

The power of narrative can be witnessed disastrously at the level of a country. Simone Weil, a French twentieth-century philosopher, writes of war as the most devastating cause of uprootedness for humanity because 'war effaces all conceptions of purpose or goal, including even its own "war aims". It effaces the very notion of wars being brought to an end. To be outside a situation so violent as this is to find it inconceivable; to be inside it is to be unable to conceive its end' (Weil, 2000, p. 181). As war brings its own cycle of terror and violence, those involved get caught up in the larger narrative and what becomes figural beyond all aims (ego) or sense of internal need (id) is the power of the sequential imperative, or narrative, itself.

It is always helpful to know the 'war stories' of a group or organisation; those tales which get told repeatedly at company events. In capturing the personality function in this way within an organisational setting, we are looking at recurrent strategic themes, shared metaphors, and imagery that are used. Exploring the meaning-making aspects of these stories or metaphors is usually a fertile area for increased awareness and change at particularly difficult and stressful times.

Interventions in an organisational context

It is clear in our descriptions above that we have focused more on the id/covert aspect of groups and organisations, the emergent field phenomenon, rather than the explicit ego functions. Working with what is overtly already 'on the table' and known is important but often holds less change potential than seeing if we can sense and bring into awareness what lurks underneath. Some consultants might call this working with the 'shadow aspects' of a team, individual or group, but we do not necessarily take the view that what is hidden is less desirable, and certainly not less powerful, than what is overt. Instead, we are interested in the power of field forces that are not so easily articulated, that cannot be described via 'objective' processes and are not the stated intention of an organisation.

At the start of a typical consulting assignment, we are usually provided with a wealth of information about the organisation; the latest Annual Report, strategic plans, internal management reports, and formal documented aspects which provide an idea of what the company reports about itself (ego function). Often, an early and very rational articulation of the issue to be tackled is also presented as part of the contracting process.

For example, the head of a department, which had recently outsourced much of its functionality, was seeking help in defining the new role for his depart-

ment. The actual issue to be tackled only revealed itself however at the first face-to-face meeting: the new field conditions called for a lighter top team and the head of the department was clearly being pushed out. Through a series of brief meetings, the internal power struggles and fear of job losses became apparent (id functions). These, however, were not acknowledged or named as the company viewed itself as a nice place to work and a place where 'we don't give people bad news' (narrative function).

Bringing to light in a well-planned workshop key aspects of the id and personality functions of the organisational self was a main intervention of this consulting assignment. The workshop included key stakeholders in order to provide appropriate levels of support and therefore enable crucial decisions to be made.

As can be seen from the above example, we are interested in those situations where willpower (ego functions) is not working, and where we need to be open to factors that are more id-like; unknown, ephemeral, ineffable, and mysterious. This can be described as looking at the forces of 'grace' rather than 'will'; the feminine influences, or right brain factors, rather than the more 'masculine', or ego, features of self. (For further reading, see Denham-Vaughan, 2005).

We also need to pay attention to the interconnectedness of self-functions (id, ego and personality). How much of what we do or say emerges creatively from what is out of our awareness? Is it a response to current, situationally-emergent factors (id), or to a historical narrative (personality)? In going too far in the separation of self-functions, we risk a reductionist approach. Instead, we need to maintain the essence of what this concept of self calls for; a holistic view of the self as fluid and responsive to current situation. Any tendency artificially to parse or habitually use specific functions will limit optimal functioning, leading to disorientation (id), lack of responsiveness (ego), and/or predictability (personality).

Conclusion

Within this brief paper we have employed PHG's (1951) concept of the process self and self-functions as a way of formulating our work with groups or organisations. In particular, we have offered a view of how we see the process self being structured into id, ego and personality functions and widely applicable. This means that once understood, they can be recognised and identified, mapped on to a group or organisation and employed as an intervention framework.

This map of self as process lies at the heart of our organisational Gestalt training programme. We believe it offers a unique perspective for the organisational leader, consultant, manager or coach, with which they can gain an appreciation of our three main strands of organisational teaching: self-as-instrument, teams/groups, and large systems. We initially teach the model of self as process and self-functions described in this paper, and employ this as a way of formulating trainees' use of self-as-instrument when undertaking organisational work. We assist with identification of personal process and show how this lies at the heart of successful coaching, managing, leading or consulting. In later modules we attend more to applying these maps and 'procedural competencies' in dyadic, group or large systems work.

We hope that this conceptualisation of the Gestalt theory of self to organisational life has added to the toolkit and understanding of OD practitioners and to the already rich contribution of Gestalt theory in this area.

Notes

1. The Organisational Gestalt training programme is offered at the Metanoia Institute, Ealing, London and is co-tutored by Marie-Anne Chidiac, Sally Denham-Vaughan and Ty Francis.

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