

Paradox: A Gestalt Theory of Change

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Underlying the application of Gestalt theory to organization development, consulting, and/or coaching is an approach that Arnold Biesser, M.D., characterized in 1970 as the paradoxical theory of change. This theory, which has become the foundation of practice at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, flows from the primary premise that meaning manifests through the differentiation, dissolution and integration---a form of absorption---of polarities. This article provides an understanding of the theoretical concepts that underpin Gestalt theory as it relates to polarity, paradox and dilemma.

Types of Polarities

As form of background to this article, it needs to be noted that at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, we acknowledge the importance of the following four types of meaning-making polarities.¹ What all polarities have in common is that they can be experienced as ambivalence² until the it is dissolved. Within the ambivalence is a dimension of “want” combined with a counter dimension of “not.” In Gestalt, there are three different versions of the ambivalence, whcih eventually is resolved.

1. **Either/Or polarities.** These polarities are ones in which the “want” and the “not want” are essentially a choice to me made at a particular point in time. There is not an inherently ongoing quality to the choice. The tension between the two seems to both fuel the dilemma and to freeze it, as if to create a push/pull effect. For example, “Do I go to graduate school or not?” Part of me wants to go and I could list the reasons. Part of me is hesitant and I can list the reasons. Fritz Perls used the 2-chair method to support people moving back and forth between the two “poles” of the ambivalence. This kept Perls from identifying with or defending either pole and kept the struggle within the individual addressing his or her ambivalence. The process was intended to lead to some “solution” created by the client in which he or she decides to go to graduate school or not. Or, he or she might come up with a possible alternative that combined the two options in some way like going part time.

This type of polarity is concluded by a decision, which allows the person to

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The first three polarities are as written by Dr. Barry Johnson in a personal correspondence to the EOD-BEI faculty of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland in February of 2009. The fourth is by the author.

2

ambivalent >adjective having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone.
-DERIVATIVES ambivalence >noun ambivalently >adverb. -ORIGIN from Latin ambi- 'on both sides' + valere 'be worth'.

move out of the inertia and ahead toward one pole. This process of getting unstuck in addressing this dilemma or polarity can be very useful. What distinguishes it from a both/and polarity is that once the decision is made, there is nothing inherent in the relationship between the two poles that will require you to include the other pole sometime in the future. If the person decides not to go to graduate school, he or she has “solved” the problem. The ambivalence has been addressed. The person is no longer “stuck.” They have had a successful conclusion to the ambivalence. There is nothing inherent in the decision to not go to graduate school that will “require” the person to go to graduate school sometime in the future. In that sense, there is no ongoing interdependence, simply a resolution of the perceived dilemma.

2. **Definitional opposites polarities.** There is historical wisdom behind the reality that opposites sometimes define each other in an interdependent way. For example, we understand darkness as a contrast to light. One helps us understand the other. These definitional opposites depend on each other like the two sides of a coin. Thus they are called “interdependent.” Good and Evil are another example. With these definitional opposite polarities, where one pole gives definition to the other, the poles come as a pair. Because the definition of one is, in part, dependent on the definition of the other, you can’t just choose one and neglect the other as you can with either/or polarities mentioned above.

Though they define each other, these definitional opposite polarities represent only part of the content of the third type of polarities (both/and). They also often appear to represent a choice in which choosing one represents moving away from the other on a single line continuum. For example, many people see good and evil on a single line continuum in which one is expected to move toward good and away from evil. Though good and evil help define each other, in the process of dealing with choice ambivalence, we are encouraged to choose the “good” over the “evil.”

3. **Both/And Polarities.** These polarities are different than the two described above. Polarity Management is about distinguishing when you have a “both/and polarity” and then understanding how to tap it as a resource for yourself and others. What distinguishes a both/and polarity from the other two is that there is an ongoing oscillation between the two poles which is unavoidable, unsolvable, and indestructible. The relationship between the poles is in dynamic tension over time. When a person or organization experiences ambivalence between the two poles of a both/and polarity they will not be served well by seeing it as either of the other two types of polarities.

This is why I think it is important to make a distinction between the 3 types of polarities rather than treat them all as “indistinguishable, generic polarities.” If the ambivalence being experienced is essentially around a both/and polarity and it is treated as an “either/or polarity;” a “definitional opposites polarity;”

or an “indistinguishable generic polarity,” the person will not be as effective an intervener as they would be if they knew the difference and could intervene accordingly.

4. **Dissolved Polarities or Differences.** Building on Johnson’s three forms of polarities, the dissolved polarity or perceptually dissolved differences can emerge. This is the naturally forming transition of the differences, the deepening meaning making process, and the energetic tension resulting in a new awareness or an emerging structure that was not perceptually possible until that particular moment.

All four of these will be further discussed in the following paragraphs which review the evolution of the paradoxical theory of change, the core of gestalt theory.

Polar Differentiation and Creative Indifference

In 1918, Salomo Friedlaender developed the concepts of polar differentiation and creative indifference. According to Friedlaender, “for a phenomenon to be perceptible and appreciable, it must stand for an opposite of something else; it must be different from some other thing.” For example, light is perceived only against its opposite, darkness.

As Wilber (1979) points out, humans make meaning by drawing mental boundary lines which create pairs of opposites:

“To this day, our lives are largely spent in drawing boundaries. Every decision we make, our every action, our every word is based on the construction, conscious or unconscious, of boundaries. To make a decision means to draw a boundary line between what to choose and what not to choose. To desire something means to draw a boundary line between pleasurable and unpleasurable things and then move toward the former” (p18). An either/or polarity.

“Every boundary line is a potential battle line, so that just to draw a boundary is to prepare oneself for conflict. Specifically, the agonizing fight of life against death, pleasure against pain, good against evil... but in seeking to experience the positive and eliminate the negative, we forget that the positive is defined only in terms of the negative. To destroy the negative is, at the same time, to destroy all possibility of enjoying the positive. The root of the whole difficulty is our tendency to view the opposites as irreconcilable, as totally set apart and divorced from one another.

“While it is true that buying and selling are in some sense different... they are also—and this is the point—completely inseparable. In other words, buying and selling are simply two ends of one event, namely, a

business transaction. In just the same way, all opposites share an implicit identity. That is, however vividly the differences between these opposites may strike us, they nevertheless remain completely inseparable and mutually interdependent, and for the simple reason that one could not exist without the other” (p21-22). A both/and polarity].

Consistent with Wilber’s observation, Gestalt theory recognizes that all choices exist on a continuum between one extreme and another (authoritarian or collegial, open-minded or closed-minded) and represent a decision, however unconscious, to position oneself nearer to one pole than to the other. This is what is meant by *polar differentiation*: seeing options on the continuum between poles.

Because the pairs of opposites (polarities) are actually extremes *on the same continuum* of possibilities, the nearer one gets to the mid-point of the continuum, the more difficult it is to differentiate one pole from another. Friedlaender calls this midpoint the point of “indifference” (118). It is at this point - the point at which the full continuum of possibilities is fully known -- that creativity becomes possible and where the polarity dissolves or, if you prefer, transforms into a higher order of understanding.

Friedlaender’s “creative indifference,” a seminal insight, became for Fritz Perls the “fertile void,” the place where meaning-making ceases and *being* begins (Frambach, 2003, 114). Friedlaender’s goal, as Perls saw it, was the achievement of this lovely neutrality in which one no longer feels pulled toward one extreme or the other and is no longer the prisoner of one way of seeing the world, which inevitably blinds one to other possibilities.

Creative indifference counteracts the human tendency to prefer one pole over its opposite, a definitional and a both/and polarity. For example, to understand order, we must also, understand in some form chaos, a definitional polarity. If we see chaos as threatening, we will tend to seek order, thereby trying to create an either/or tension from an both/and polarity. But as chaos theory, complex adaptive systems theory and complexity science point out, seeking order (conformity) to the exclusion of chaos (disagreement) can lead to the destruction or mediocre functioning of a system.

When we are able to see chaos and order not as enemies, but instead as polarities on a continuum of choices, we are free to move in either direction or envelope both options to something higher, thereby by embracing or dissolving the differences such as the polarity of buying and selling is to create a transaction. This unleashes creative energy and creates fresh possibilities. The polarity becomes a new holon, encompassing both poles in their fullness and their wholeness beyond the polarity.

In this way, the usual meaning-making process of polar differentiation is set aside in a state of pure *being*, through a deliberate act of polar *indifferentiation*. The

closer we come to simply being, the more we open a space (fertile void) in which fresh possibilities can arise.

Poles such as rage and gentleness "should not be *isolated from each other* as mutually exclusive contradictions, but should be experienced as *a unit of opposites*," says Frambach. It is possible to achieve this perspective by being "flexibly centered in [one's own] indifferent center." In this way, one can react freely and appropriately, either angrily or with gentleness, to the demands of the situation from a totality of experience (Frambach, 2003, 120).

When creative indifference is applied to a consulting intervention, the intervener can, by remaining alert in the center, acquire the "creative ability [to see] both sides of an occurrence and [thus to complete] an incomplete half. By avoiding a one-sided outlook, [the intervener gains] a much deeper insight into the structure and function of the organism" (Perls, 1969, 14-15).

In other words, working with creative indifference has the effect of absorbing the polarity such that the client system "knows" itself or relates to its environment in a new or expanded way.

Holism

Smuts (1926) developed the term "holism" to reflect "the process of creative synthesis" (p.87) that permeates the evolutionary tendency of the universe in all of its forms of existence. Perls applied this concept to psychological processes, whereby the individual is perceived to be more than simply the sum of his or her experiences, just as an organization is perceived to be more than the sum of the individuals within it. There is at once a reciprocal and deterministic relationship between the whole and the parts, and (as is true with any polarity) one cannot be fully understood without the other.

Wilber (1996) extended the concept of holism with his discussion of "holons," a term coined by Arthur Koestler in his 1967 book, *The Ghost in the Machine*. As Wilber explains, a holon is "any entity that is itself a whole and simultaneously a part of some other whole" (p. 20). For example, letters are parts of words, and words are parts of sentences. Each level consists of entities that are *wholes* in themselves (e.g., individuals) that are also *parts* in relationship with other wholes (e.g., groups and organizations).

Gestalt holism is rooted in the concept that an individual's search for meaning cannot be reduced to the sum of his or her experiences; the individual must be considered within the larger reality of which he is a part. "By keeping an eye on the context or field or whole in which a phenomenon is embedded," Perls argued, "we avoid many misunderstandings" (1969, p. 29).

The importance of this concept deepens when we understand that, in an intervention,

the Gestaltist (one holon) joins with the client (a second holon - either an individual or a group/system) to create a third holon that is more than and different from the sum of its parts. The Gestalt intervener therefore needs to be aware of the wholeness of each part, the dynamic relationships between the parts, the whole (higher-level) entity that they form together, and the interdependence among the parts and the whole.

Figure/Ground - the original polarity

The core Gestalt concept of *figure/ground* enables us to see how we perceive and organize experiences. The *figure* is a focus of interest—an object, a pattern or a behavior—that emerges from the *ground* (the environment or context). As the figure emerges and becomes clear, it acquires meaning for the individual or group. For example, sitting in an office full of books, reports, and a PC, a figure will surface to direct my attention of what I choose focus on. The choices at the extreme is limitless as one may choose to ignore everything in the office and focus on a problem at home; only to be interrupted by a telephone call that redirects our attention. The interplay between figure and ground is dynamic. Our attention is apt to shift from one figure of interest to another; when we are no longer interested in a figure it recedes into the ground and is replaced by another (Polster & Polster, 1973, p. 31). A complex figure may in turn fade into the ground when some detail of the original figure emerges as a new figure (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1971, p. 25).

The fertile void or place of creative indifference is the ground. The goal of Gestalt process is to “lead increasingly from the one-sided fixation [on] that which is in the foreground to the ground, from the periphery to the middle and center, by way of integrating rigid dualities into flexible polarities” (Frambach, 2003)

Another important characteristic of perception is the tendency toward *closure* - that is, toward making meaning about a figure. Presented with a circle of unconnected dots, for example, the perceiver instinctively fills in the gaps mentally to create a complete, bounded image.

When we do not take actions necessary for closure, our experiences remain “unfinished and uneasy” in the background of our mind, where they disturb present work that needs to be done (Polster & Polster, p. 30). In Gestalt, this is referred to as *unfinished business*.

Change is a function of closing one experience and moving on to a new possibility. But we can only open to new possibilities when “the preoccupation with the old incompleteness is resolved” (p. 37) -- that is, when closure is reached.

Gestalt has a high regard for novelty and change and -- paradoxically -- "a faith-filled expectation that... [change] is inevitable if we *stay with our own experiences* as they actually form” (p48). This means not being so quick to impose old meanings on our experiences so we can put them on the shelf and be "done with" them (rush to

closure); instead, it means listening, with creative indifference, to what they have to tell us.

Contact

From the time the umbilical cord is cut, our sense of being with others “depends paradoxically on a heightened sense of separateness and it is this paradox which we constantly seek” (Polster & Polster, pp. 98-99). The paradox of separateness and union can be temporarily experienced when the walls of individuality remain strong enough to hold the sense of self together, yet permeable enough to allow the sense of what is other to be experienced. At that point, *contact* (with self, other, group or environment) is made. We can most effectively make such contact by staying present-centered.

To understand contact, we need to look at how we relate to the world. Gestalt theory is built on the conviction that no person, group or organization is really an independent entity, but that together they “constitute a functioning, mutually influencing total system.” Paradoxically, self cannot exist without other(s).

Contact is not simply a matter of joining or togetherness, but involves a heightened awareness of the *distinction* between self and not-self; in other words, contact occurs at a porous boundary, one that holds self and other apart, but at the same time permits interaction and exchange: “The contact boundary is the point at which one experiences the ‘me’ *in relation to* that which is ‘not me’ and through this contact, both are more clearly experienced” (Polster & Polster, pp. 102-103).

Paradoxically, it is possible for contrary impulses to co-exist side by side. Within the same individual or system there is both the mobilization to grow and the resistances to growth. As a result, the self-other boundary is inconsistent, sometimes blocking out, and sometimes opening up to, contact (p. 110). For example, a client may project onto others the emotions or thoughts that he is attracted to but cannot own. This allows him to impose meaning on his experiences while at the same time containing his anxieties.

To help the client acknowledge, modify or extend his contact boundary, the Gestalt practitioner must make contact tolerable first by containing the emotions or thoughts for the client, and then gradually handing them back to the client. Sometimes this takes the form of words, at other times of silence--which invites the client to come forward and try owning, in even a limited way, the emotion or thought. If the client seems too threatened, the practitioner will initiate boundary-maintaining action (Billow, 2000, p. 247). But this is all part of a carefully managed process whereby the client is gradually led and encouraged to face and when appropriate, to own, his or her dis-owned thoughts and emotions, and thus to begin to integrate them into his or her self.

By containing the present situation for the client, the Gestaltist allows

something new to emerge -- either by supporting the emergence and acknowledgment of new possibilities or by allowing existing frames of reference that are partially obscured to unfold with more clarity. Thus, paradoxically, the act of *containing* actually becomes transformative.

An important tool in this process is the Gestalt *experiment*. The client (individual, team or organization) is invited and encouraged to “try on” behaviors that feel alien, frightening or unacceptable within the secure container of the intervention. The Gestalt experiment seeks to draw out and stretch the habitual self (or system) boundary by allowing the client to experience what a new way of being or doing, and to experience a different outcome as the result. In co-constructing the experiment with the client, the Gestaltist aims to create what Polster and Polster (p112) call a “safe emergency,” -- a minimally-threatening boundary-challenging situation within a supportive container of contact.

Resistances

Frequently, habitual behaviors and attitudes get in the way of change. During the early years of Gestalt theoretical development, Perls, Hefferline and Goodman conceived of this *resistance* as the opposition to change.

But eventually they began to see resistance as a deeply rooted fear of contact caused by an unhealthy blockage that is used to avoid some form of pain, real or imagined. With this reframe they came to see resistance as a problem to be worked through.

The early Gestaltists identified six internal mechanisms of resistance: introjection, projection, retroreflection, deflection, confluence and desensitization. Figure 2 describes how these mechanisms function for the individual.

Figure 2 Resistances

- Introjection** Taking in or swallowing an experience “whole,” without question. Being naive or gullible. A positive example of introjection would be, “Always look before you cross the street.”
- Projection** Blaming or attributing one’s disowned feelings, desires or characteristics to another. Anticipating behavior from someone else that has more to do with one’s own fears or hang-ups. Example: “He’s going to attack me the minute I open my mouth” (spoken by someone who sees others’ disagreement as attack because he cannot own his own hostility).
- Retroreflection** Doing to yourself what you want to do to others, or what you want others to do to you. Examples: swallowing one’s anger to avoid conflict;

soothing oneself when feeling threatened.

Deflection Avoiding direct contact by breaking the mood, shifting attention or changing the subject. Examples: using a joke or sarcasm to diffuse a serious situation; ignoring or refusing a compliment.

Confluence "Going along to get along." Agreeing with others to avoid conflict or because one is unable to differentiate oneself and still feel valued or accepted. Example: agreeing with others' opinions to avoid having to take a position.

Desensitization "Numbing out." Feeling nothing as a way to avoid dealing with difficult or painful issues. Dissociating or avoiding direct contact physically, emotionally or mentally. For example, adopting a cynical or supercilious attitude in the face of real pain.

In 1991, Wheeler offered an important reconceptualization of resistance. Instead of seeing resistance as avoidance of contact, Wheeler looked at resistance as part of the contact process (p. 119). His reframe shifted the conception of resistance from negative to positive (or neutral) and showed how these internal defenses actually reflect a range of creative and adaptive contact styles for an individual, group, or organization (p. 126). Wheeler's continuum of contact styles is shown in Figure 3.

Healthy function involves moving freely among these contact styles. When an individual's (or system's) contact style moves to either extreme of this continuum -- or gets stuck on one pole of the continuum -- it becomes dysfunctional to varying degrees.

Figure 3: Contact Styles

Contact Styles

Confluence	-----	Differentiation
Projection	-----	Retention, Literalness
Introjection	-----	Chewing, Deconstructing
Retroflection	-----	Exchange, Encounter
Desensitization/ Egoism	-----	Merging, Yielding
Deflection	-----	Focusing, Concentration

This shift from seeing resistance as a defense mechanism to seeing it as a *style of contact* enriches the Gestalt practitioner's ability to understand and work *with* resistance in the change process. Under Wheeler's taxonomy, resistance to contact became *resistance to awareness* or to *other ways of being* in the world, and therefore to *growth* (pp. 127, 129). Once adequate support is developed within the individual and/or in the environment, greater awareness and new ways of being in the world are possible.²

When it comes to contact styles, the Gestaltist strives to occupy the neutral territory between the poles, the “center” of the polarity, where both poles can be perceived and understood with creative indifference.

The Paradox of Contact Styles

One of the central tenets of Gestalt Psychology is that healthy functioning involves good contact with self and others. Good contact needs to be appropriate to the situation and relational. We modify contact all the time.

Wheeler’s approach to contact styles is revolutionary but lacks the depth of the paradox that exists within contact styles and therefore the potential for leading to creative indifference, the formation of a transformative and insightful holon for the client. As described above, Wheeler has taken the resistances as described by Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman and created his own polarity between the the original gestalt resistances and what has been taught as the behavioral solutions for each resistance. Hence, he portrays confluence as the opposite of differentiation.

Contact Styles as a Continuum

In the following paragraphs, we explore contact styles as a continuum between two poles creating a polarity for each contact style and therefore the creation of the paradox of change, wherein as the individual or organization embraces the entire polarity, change occurs, and more choices become available. In essence, contact styles embed the creative indifference of Friedlaender. Instead of the polarities described by Wheeler, the literal opposite of the original resistances is paired to create a paradox, such as the opposite of introjection is rejection and the integrating process to see and embrace the differences, to make meaning, to embrace the tension between, and to finally dissolve the differences into a higher understanding is through differentiation.

Introjection. Rejection

Introjection - A Gestalt Psychology term for the process whereby an opinion, attitude, or instruction is unquestionably taken-in from the environment as if it were true. Not filtering experiences for what resonates with personal truth. Being naïve or gullible.

Introjection is something kids under seven years old do automatically with everything their parents tell them or demonstrate for them.

Examples:

Positive Introjects - forceful instructions given to small children, which are absorbed often without understanding, i.e., "don't play near the river" or "come home before dark".

Negative Introjects/Injunctions - "Never depend on others" or "You will never amount to anything". Intensity (an accompanied slap to the face by a parent) or repetition (hearing it over and over again) strengthens the power of introjects and injunctions.

The person who is under the influence of an introject feels a strong pressure to conform and feels uncomfortable if s/he tries to go against it. Sometimes, if s/he pays attention to her/his thoughts, the person can actually hear the instruction and, if asked, can actually say who "gave" it to him.

Rejection - It's clearly healthy to reject an attitude, opinion, or belief it does not fit with the person's values and integrity. However, sometimes a person may manifest Rejection as a habitual style.

Examples:

- » May appear to disagree with or "spit out" every suggestion offered or s/he may reject anything in a particular area or related to a particular issue.
- » Sometimes, a person rejects not only the opinions of others but anything he is given, including love and attention.
- » Rejection can come across as mistrust, rebellion, or excessive self-reliance.

In the struggle to identify what is "me" and what is "not me", a person may find it easier to define what is "not me" in terms of what he dislikes or disagrees with... rather than identify what is "me" especially if they are not in contact with their own wants and needs.

Other times, a rejecting attitude stems from a profound fear of being controlled or criticized. In this case you'll notice the person's tendency to avoid answering questions or following suggestions.

Actions: Support the client to pause, reflect, and choose whether to accept or reject the opinion, attitude, or instructions. Experiment with ways to stay fully present, while chewing-on what other's say before accepting or rejecting without question.

Projection. Ownership

Projection - While the term Projection has other definitions, here it refers to disowned or alienated parts of the self.

When a person struggles with accepting a quality or aspect of his personality that is incompatible with his or her self-concept, he or she may effectively project it out of their awareness on to another person as in the following example:

"A hard-working person told of a time when he returned home after a

particularly taxing day. He met his wife at the door and said to her, "you look really tired", to which his wife perceptively replied "you should lie down for a couple of hours". When he woke up, his wife said to him "do I look more rested now?"

Ownership - Ownership has always been a cornerstone of Gestalt Psychology. It's the concept of accepting responsibility for all aspects of oneself.

However, taken too far, it involves the person accepting or owning everything including what is not his/her responsibility or taking on what is not his/hers. At the extreme, it manifests itself as self-blame or excessive guilt. This is common in cases of sexual abuse or sudden bereavement.

Actions: Support the client to determine if the experience is "real or memorex" by checking perceptions with the client. Experiment with various forms of projections and forms of ownership.

Deflection. Reception
(Thought Reaction)

Deflection is ignoring or turning away either an internal or external emotional trigger in order to prevent full recognition or awareness of associated material...e.g., painful memories.

Characterized in Gestalt Psychology either by blocking the trigger itself or by turning oneself away and going off on a tangent.

Persons often deflect from their feelings and impulses by endless talking...by laughing instead of taking themselves seriously...or by always focusing on the needs of the other.

Other examples of deflection include:

- » Changing the subject repeatedly when a particular issue is raised
- » Appearing not to hear or see something
- » Misunderstanding or redefining what has been said or done

Overly-Receptive people are bombarded by a myriad of stimuli...receiving too much input, in contrast to the deflector, this person has a tendency to pay too much attention to those stimuli.

He or she finds it difficult to ignore them or to selectively choose what is relevant that any one time leaving them "flooded" with thoughts and feelings. Emotional regulation problems are often a result.

Actions: Support the client to stay present in the here and now by focusing and concentrating on what to allow in and what to filter out. Boundary development.

Desensitization. Sensitivity
(Emotional Reaction)

Desensitization - Similar to deflection, this is another way of avoiding contact with an emotional trigger. However, while deflection prevents the stimulus from reaching our thoughts... Desensitization concerns a more profound form of shutting down at the emotional level.

Clues to the differences between deflection and desensitization:

- » Other people find themselves feeling sleepy and heavy in the presence of the desensitized person
- » They may feel irritated, frustrated, or agitated in the presence of a deflector.

Sensitivity - Much like the over-receiver, the overly sensitive person can suffer from an overload of sensory stimuli that he or she is unable to ignore. This can appear as hypochondria or... at a more ordinary level... an inability to evaluate the meaning or significance of a sensation.

In addition to an overload of sensory data, over-sensitivity can show up in a thinking or emotional sense as well. For example, hypersensitivity to real or perceived criticism, or a belief that one must be perfect or is nothing at all.

Actions: Support the Client to stay fully grounded in their body so as to learn how to stretch the capacity to stay present in the here and now. Experiment with supporting the client to take in small amounts of sensation to prevent overwhelm and hypersensitivity.

Confluence. Withdrawal

A person who fears that closeness to another person will involve some threat of loss, rejection, hurt, or abandonment, may solve the problem by either enmeshing with the other (clinging/pursuing) or disengaging (withdrawing/distancing).

Confluence - The feelings and wishes of a significant other easily overwhelm the confluent person, who responds as if they were his own feelings and desires. Often becomes extremely anxious when separation occurs or is threatened. Enmeshment occurs when a person can't tell "...where I end and you begin" due to an inability to distinguish the interpersonal boundary.

Withdrawal - The person whose habitual contact style is Withdrawal does not often seek therapy. However sometimes he will come in saying he sees other people having a better time than he and he thinks that he has something missing.

He might use a metaphor about himself, such as feeling like an alien, or been trapped in a bottle or being behind a the invisible wall.

Actions: Support the client to differentiate between self and other. Experiment with developing core values a or opinions as well with learning to voice differences between self and other. A critical issue to learn to define the self as a whole .

Retroflection..... Impulsiveness

Retroflection is holding back an impulse (e.g. speech, expressing feelings, and/or behavior)... The person's energetic flow is interrupted.

Outcomes:

The impulse may die away naturally through such things as self soothing.
The energy can be turned inward causing bodily tensions, somatic illnesses, depression or even self harm

Impulsiveness involves unrestrained expression of impulses... e.g. speech, expressing feelings, and/or behavior... in a way that is dangerous to self or others, such as self-harm or other uncontrolled or violent outbursts.

Actions: Support the client to pause, reflect and choose when and how to engage, encounter, and exchange with self, other, and the environment.

Egotism. Spontaneity

Egotism - In Gestalt Psychology, Egotism is characterized by an excessive preoccupation with one's own thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and effect on others. The preoccupation can be positive, admiring and self-congratulatory or critical and undermining - either way it is an avoidance of real relational contact.

It's as if this person gets trapped in their own thoughts. The task here is to encourage the person to move away from their self-monitoring and self-reflection into a more immediate contact with others and their environment.

Spontaneity - In contrast to egotism, unrestrained Spontaneity is an absence of necessary reflection and self-monitoring. Excessive spontaneity can be seen in impulse disorders, mania, and antisocial behavior.

Also in direct contrast to egotism, it's as if this person is unable to even access their thinking and gets trapped in their feelings and impulses. Persons with ADHD are said to be "addicted to the moment" for this very reason.

Actions: Support the client to pause, reflect and choose what to engage (self, other, environment), how to engage, and when to engage.

Reconciling Opposing Needs

In the organizational context, Nevis saw resistance to change--for example, someone's refusing to "join in"--as an expression of the differentiation of opposites (polar differentiation). For Nevis, "any instance where one or more persons do not seem to be 'joining' is a manifestation of multi-directed energy. This term conveys the notion of multiple forces or desires, not all of which support each other, and many of which pull in different directions" (Nevis, 147). In other words, part of this individual wants to join in, but part of him doesn't.

Seeing this resistance as an inner conflict--rather than just seeing the loner as being obstinate--the Gestalt practitioner has something to work with: One could, for example, ask the individual to experiment with what it feels like to move in the direction of one pole or the other. In so doing, he can begin to see his resistance as a matter of choices, and become aware that he is being pulled in different directions by opposing (and equally valid) needs.

Over the years, the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland has augmented Nevis's concept of multi-directed energy in the system by asserting that *all* change is rooted in opposing forces: a force for change, and a force for sameness. In this view, change is seen as achieving a successful reconciliation of opposing needs. This allows for the effective application of creative indifference, offering a more complex understanding and use of the tension between the two poles.

More importantly, Gestalt theory recognizes that a system is acting in a *healthy* manner when these two forces appear. Neither pole is demonized or de-valued; both are respected as natural and legitimate human needs. Unlike past conceptions of change that demanded pushing through or leaping over or banishing the forces for sameness (resistance to change), Gestalt focuses instead on heightening awareness within the system. The client comes to see that he (or the team or organization) actually needs both things--the expanded versatility and survival capability that positive change brings, as well as the security and stability of the familiar--and that the system is healthiest when it can find a way to have both in some kind of balance.

Recent theoretic developments have further shaped our understanding of the forces for sameness and for change as a form of competing commitments. Kegan and Lahey (2001) find that while individuals may overtly accept and embrace a change agenda, they often unconsciously exert equal but underground energy to *not* changing. This resistance is not a matter of simple stubbornness, nor is it a question of apathy or inertia. Rather, the "resulting dynamic equilibrium [between the forces for change and for maintaining the status quo, or *sameness*] stalls the effort in what looks like resistance but is in fact a kind of personal immunity to change" (p. 85).

And here is where Kegan and Lahey offer an important insight. Within this framework, the individual's resistance will be seen as founded on what the authors call "a big assumption." The import of that, they say, is profound: "Because big

assumptions are held as fact, they actually inform what people see, leading them to systematically (but unconsciously) attend to certain data and avoid or ignore other data” (p. 90).

Gestalt theory asserts, and Kegan and Lahey affirm, that bringing the big assumption into awareness is transforming. They offer a humorous example of the consequences of holding an unconscious big assumption:

A woman we met from Australia told us about her experience living in the United States for a year. “Not only do you drive on the wrong side of the street over here,” she said, “your steering wheels are on the wrong side, too. I would routinely pile into the right side of the car to drive off, only to discover I needed to get out and walk over to the other side.” “One day,” she continued, “I was thinking about six different things, and I got into the right side of the car, took out my keys, and was prepared to drive off. I looked up and thought to myself, ‘My God, here in the violent and lawless United States, they are even stealing steering wheels!’ Of course the countervailing evidence was just an arm’s length to her left, but—and this is the main point—why should she look? Our big assumption creates a disarming and deluding sense of certainty. If we know where a steering wheel belongs, we are unlikely to look for it some place else. If we know what our company, department, boss, or subordinate can and can’t do, why look for countervailing data—even if it is just an arm’s length away? (p. 91)

Whether the term is *resistance*, *competing commitment* or *big assumption*, or something else, the process underlying our preferred contact styles is a function of deeply ingrained and hidden thinking patterns.

Weick and Bougon note that these deep-seated thinking patterns “tend to be self-sealing... precisely because they lack self-critical elements.” This self-sealed pattern is known as a *fixed Gestalt*. Every organization or industry has a tendency to institutionalize its own particular pattern of thinking regarding business strategies and the best way to approach problems. When the familiar pattern of thinking no longer serves the organization because it has become repetitive and self-sealed (a fixed Gestalt), a totally fresh approach is called for: It becomes necessary to “think outside the box.” From a Gestalt perspective, creating *awareness* of the customary thinking pattern frees individuals and organizations from their fixed perceptions.

Polarity Management

As noted at the beginning of this article, “many phenomena could not exist if their opposites did not also exist” (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, p. 43). We glean both the manifest and the nuanced meaning of one from the other: day helps to define night, and *vice versa*; hot helps to define cold, and *vice versa*; old helps to define young and *vice versa*.

Life is “a never-ending sequence of polarities. When an individual [explicitly] recognizes one aspect of her self, the presence of the antithesis, or polar quality, is implicit” (Polster & Polster, p. 61). In other words, everyone carries within him- or herself the latent and potential opposite of his or her external character. In a modern organizational setting, for example, kindness might have a range of opposites, from outright cruelty, to humiliating an employee in public, to being insensitive toward another person’s feelings. Erving Polster has named these related polarities “multilarities” (Zinker, 1978, pp. 196-197).

As Perls points out, when an individual or an entire organization aligns itself explicitly or implicitly with one pole, “the polarity [or multarity] itself can become, without anybody’s realizing it, a generator of conflict” (Perls, 1969, 19).

Polarities and multarities become increasingly important as organizations become more complex and face more of what Rittel (1972 p390-396) calls “wicked” problems. Wicked problems are not evil, even though they might seem so. But unlike “tame” problems, which are solvable, wicked problems are inherently unsolvable. They are dilemmas that become more complex and (paradoxically) possibly even less solvable with each attempt toward resolution. According to Rittel, wicked problems cannot be easily defined or isolated from other related problems; the root cause is unknown; and there is no single correct answer (each identified solution has negative and positive consequences). The “wickedness” of the situation describes the dawning awareness of the complexity of the web that the organization has spun. No matter which way it turns to find a solution, the organization runs into itself.

In the face of a wicked problem, the Gestaltist aims to help the client find resolution through heightening awareness of the limitations of the way the client is perceiving the problem. Wicked problems are unsolvable because they contain *competing commitments or competing realities* whose resolution cannot be reached through “either/or” problem-solving. These problems can only be managed, not solved; they must be approached with “both/and” thinking (Johnson, 1992).

The significance of the polarity can be gauged by the degree to which each party rejects (disowns) or worse, *discredits the validity* of, the opposing reality. Rejecting or refusing serious discussion of one pole in a polarity (or multarity) diminishes the organization’s flexibility in responding to wicked problems and seriously cripples its ability to realize its greater potential. Such an organization/individual/group “does not see how it creates its own difficulties” by blocking parts of itself from being expressed. It is unaware of how it “interrupts’ itself” (Merry & Brown, 1987, p. 154).

Awareness of the issue as a polarity to manage rather than as a problem to be solved opens the door to the possibility of resolution. The job of the intervener, then, is to help clients to see that there is a way out of the dilemma. Resolution begins with looking honestly and with genuine curiosity at the entire polarity. As Polster and Polster point out, this awareness allows warring parties to “become *allies*

in the common search for a [positive outcome], rather than uneasy *opponents* maintaining the split” (p. 248, italics added). This requires clients to be willing to suspend their deep-seated conviction that anyone who holds a point of view different from their own is the enemy, or that one position is absolutely right and the other is absolutely wrong.

Once the actual character of the situation has been clearly established, the next task is to show how the opposing forces of the polarity in fact depend upon one another.

In organizations, more often than not, the imagined solution to a problem is to choose either one pole or the other as the best or right way to go. But true polarities are never really resolved; they can only be managed or balanced. That’s because each pole and its apparent opposite actually *depend on one another*. "The pairs are involved in an ongoing, *balancing* process over an extended period of time. They are interdependent. They *need* each other” (Johnson, p. 82, italics added).³

For example, it has become popular for organizations to choose *either* team-directed project management *or* individual-directed project management. A Gestalt approach would view this issue not as a matter of "either/or" and would suggest that an organization does not have to choose one format over the other across the board. In fact, both individual effort and team work are necessary for healthy organizational functioning. Beginning to think in terms of managing polarities allows an organization to move comfortably from one approach to the other, or to combine the two, depending on the context.

Example: Gestalt and Appreciative Inquiry

In creating the *Appreciative Inquiry* approach to organizational change, David Cooperrider realized that many people, teams and organizations are predisposed to focus on what is wrong or broken in a system. He attributed this predisposition to the problem-solving mentality of the scientific method, which tends to ignore what is working well and doesn’t need to be fixed. Cooperrider advocates for shifting from an analytic critique of organizational failures to a more appreciative approach. But this prescription for positivity does not address the base assumption or belief that led to the over-focus on problem-solving in the first place.

Cooperrider’s method seeks to harness untapped creative energies by redirecting attention away from problem-solving and toward an "appreciative inquiry" into organizational success factors. Such an inquiry generates collective energy for change, as common themes and imaginative outlooks are discovered and put to positive use (Cooperrider & Dutton, 1999; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Cooperrider, et al., 2000).

By assessing the “*what is*” of an organization, the Gestalt approach would reveal any predisposition to focusing on *what’s wrong*. But rather than directing the

focus of the organization toward the opposite pole (a positive psychology) as Appreciative Inquiry would do, the Gestaltist would create a *container* for and heighten awareness of the situation until the fullness of the theme is revealed -- *including polar differentiations*. That is, a Gestalt approach would explore *both* how focusing on what is wrong has served and dis-served the organization, *and* on how focusing on what is right has served and dis-served the organization. Once this awareness of the polar differentiation has been developed, the organization can *choose* with creative indifference to keep the productive aspects of problem-solving and/or adopt a positive approach, depending on the context.

Gestalt Theory and Change

Systems theory permeates Gestalt theory. While each of the core concepts of systems theory can be a dynamic gateway to understanding the client system, homeostasis and dynamic equilibrium are the most helpful concepts for understanding change.

Homeostasis is the predisposition of the individual, group or organization to maintain some semblance of stability or pre-determined sense of well-being; e.g., the body seeks to maintain a normal temperature. *Equilibrium*, according to *The Oxford University Press Electronic Dictionary*, is "a state in which opposing forces or influences are balanced, such as the state of being physically balanced or in a calm state of mind, or as in chemistry, a state in which a process and its reverse are occurring at equal rates so that no overall change is taking place, or as in economics, a situation in which supply and demand are matched and prices are stable."

These two predispositions--to homeostasis (maintaining a pre-determined sense of stability, and thus of well-being) and equilibrium (keeping opposing forces in balance)--are, from the Gestalt perspective, key to understanding the internal functioning of an organization. The tendency of systems (as with individuals) to organize their sense of possibilities around entrenched poles leads to paralysis in the face of changing situations and emerging forces that need to be held in balance.

In the Gestalt view, any individual, group or organization is actually a self-correcting system of countervailing motions that continuously adjust to preserve the system. Thus, organizations tend to exist in a kind of *dynamic* equilibrium that is pre-programmed to resist real change, just as an individual has an "an immunity to change" (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, 6). We cannot see and often are not aware of these immunities to change, Kegan and Lahey observed, because "we live inside them." The sense that we are in control is illusory where these complex adjustments that insulate us for a while from the need to change. "We do not 'have them,' they 'have us.' We cannot see them because we too are caught up in them" (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, 6).

This is why the Gestalt intervention focuses on the "what is" of the organization's dynamic equilibrium. The Gestaltist helps the members of an organization to see how their pre-disposed tendency to organize their thinking around

polarized extremes--and then to bury their differences in increasingly complex arrangements for the sake of maintaining an illusory stability--actually blocks them from opportunities to change in positive ways.

The Paradoxical Theory of Change

The paradoxical theory of change is the touchstone and guiding principle for most Gestalt interventions. According to this theory, "change does not take place by trying coercion, or persuasion, or by insight, interpretation, or any other such means. Rather, change can occur when the [client] abandons, at least for the moment, what he [or she] would like to become and attempts to be what he [or she] is" (Beisser, 1970, p. 77). In other words, the possibility for real change opens up when the individual or group stops trying to become what it is not and fully acknowledges what it is.

According to Gestalt theory, the client seeking change is in conflict with at least two internal or external warring factions, the force for change and the force for sameness. Caught between what *should be* and *what is*, and never fully identifying with either, the client becomes paralyzed between two or more competing commitments (Beisser, 1970, 77).

The Gestaltist asks the client to fully identify with and invest in, one at a time, the opposing factions. First, the point of view and values of one faction are explored, sincerely and from the inside; then the client shifts to another. In doing so, the Gestaltist asks that the client simply *be* what "is" at the moment. *Be* the person who argues for position A, and so on.

Consistent with Friedlaender's concept of creative indifference, the Gestalt practitioner rejects the directive role of change agent, and instead takes the role of "awareness agent," encouraging the client to take the time and make the sincere effort to be fully invested, with awareness and without judgment, in the current situation.

The implication of this theory is that, if the client is to be able to truly stand outside the situation--what has become universally known as "the box"--the individual, group or organization must risk identifying with the opposing point of view or views. In other words--and here lies the paradox--to be able to change, a person (or organization) has to want to change badly enough that he, she, it is willing to approach problems in a radically different way: by identifying with the opposing perspective. When this happens, polar differentiations melt into creative indifference, fresh possibilities emerge, and the client is free to step into an entirely new "what is."

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