

Moving towards more supportive fields: Communities of Practice (COPs), Community Action Networks (CANs), and Relational Communities of Practice (RCOPs)

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Abstract: Since its inception Gestalt psychotherapy has been ‘relational’. Indeed, the very notion of ‘contact’, a formulation lying at the heart of the theory, makes no sense without a concept of one variable, classically ‘organism’, coming up against another, classically ‘environment’ (see Perls, 1973; Polster and Polster, 1973, for more discussion). To advance scholarship and practice, however, requires us to reflect continually on both the nature and application of this relationality; determining whether or not Gestalt is still living up to these insights and aspirations, and in what new ways we might deliver good Gestalt practice, both with individuals and with groups and communities. In this paper we seek to contribute to this personal and community reflection as applied to working with communities and teams. We will therefore focus on a selection of ways that Gestalt theory can be applied to practical community-building strategies and the challenges that such applications pose. We will do this from the perspectives of theoretical discussion about the subject and personal experiences of approaches to community and team-building. We will suggest that, due to its flexible and relational qualities, a Gestalt approach is suited to being an approach of choice for creating more supportive communities and teams where individuals can flourish. We add that drawing explicitly on other theories about communities of practice and community action networks can add to our theoretical and practical sensitivities in this area.

Key words: Gestalt, relational, community, authenticity, presence.

Introduction

In our work (at Relational Change and the London School of Economics and Political Science), we share a particular interest in the theoretical and practical application of Gestalt psychotherapy concepts to working with and within communities and teams, to help people in them individually and collectively to achieve better outcomes. We believe this reflects the aims at the heart of field-relational Gestalt practice, with its original emphasis on the quality of contact between organism/person and environment/world and the stated claims of Gestalt to raise awareness of the detailed nature of this relationship (see Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951, for more discussion). We recognise, however, that for scholarship and practice in this area to continue to flourish we need to reflect continually on what precisely a relational perspective means in this community and team context and in what ways we might deliver best practice.

In this paper we seek to contribute to this personal

and community reflection, to focus on how Gestalt theory can be applied to practical community/team-building strategies and the challenges that such applications pose. We will do this from the perspectives of theoretical discussion about the subject and personal experiences of approaches to community-building. We will add to this by drawing on ideas about working with communities from beyond Gestalt theory to further our theoretical and practical sensitivities in this area of work.

For us both, when starting to work with communities or teams, the straightforward (albeit radical and political) question that arises is this: if there is an experience of ‘issues/conflict’ in person/environment relationships, then ‘which side’ of the relational boundary needs to change to create a sense of harmony: person and/or environment? Sadly, all too often our experience of working in health and social care has been that it is the person who is expected to change. We describe this as a process of ‘individualism’ and monologic praxis, despite many so-called ‘person-

centred' or 'dialogical' practices (see Clark, Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2014, for further discussion and illustration).

In these reflections, we return to a tension inherent within the Gestalt field from the outset and perhaps best expressed by Paul Goodman who believed that wider socio-political change and community action were vital to create environments where individuals can flourish. In our work we recognise, however, that this is a very different movement/organising pattern than the one we typically encounter of creating opportunities for individual people to change, even when those people are living in communities and/or working in teams and organisations.

Our question for the focus of this article, then, is what are the theoretical and practical insights we might learn from a Gestalt approach and others to developing communities/teams that would enable them to best develop personal and collective potential? In asking this question we believe that Gestalt theory contains a radically different ethic, theory and relational possibility than most approaches. Jim Simkin and Gary Yontef, writing in 1981, stated:

A psychotherapy that only helps patients adjust creates conformity and stereotypy. A psychotherapy that only led people to impose themselves on the world without considering others would engender pathological narcissism and a world-denying realization of self isolated from the world. A person who shows creative interaction takes responsibility for the ecological balance between self and surroundings. (cited in An Introduction at <<http://www.gestalt.org>>)

It is the possibility of this 'ecological balance' occurring in relationships within communities/teams that interests us: how to support individuals to 'take responsibility' for attending to their part in relationships and how to help communities/teams, who steward the relational environment, foster conditions where people flourish and thrive.

In this article we will offer reflections and examples from early work by us and others developing Communities of Practice (COPs), Community Action Networks (CANs), and Relational Communities of Practice (RCOPs). We will share some ideas regarding what we have learnt from using such approaches and from our personal contact with a growing international network of such groups drawing on Gestalt ideas. This network has grown as Gestalt practitioners across the globe have increasingly considered the implications of Gestalt theory with its central and dialogical tenet being that we are co-emerging from a field, not existent within one (as in systems theory) and that, therefore, responsibility falls to us to steward the health of the relational (as well as physical) environment. By comparing the different models of COPs, CANs and

RCOPs, and their key goals and ideas, we seek to enhance the debates about Gestalt theory and practice with and within communities and teams.

As Gestalt practitioners have come to these ideas they have begun to develop local and national groups and international links to exchange experiences of practice and together make sense of how to extend and enhance their work with communities. Relational Change (RC) is one such example of a community of practitioners sharing these interests and aims, and examples of other organisations/networks with similar ideas and ideals can be found amongst affiliates of RC.¹

We acknowledge, of course, that many other networks exist and, indeed, have inspired our own explorations. Work in the Gestalt world concerning community organising has been documented previously (see, for example, Lee (2004), Klaren et al. (2015), Fairfield (2013), Melnick and Nevis (2009)), and both the types of communities/teams and nature of work discussed vary widely. We are also aware of different geographical communities across a variety of countries and that the cultural diversity of communities is vitally significant to the forms that interventions take. A simple recipe for community/team work cannot, then, be written, but more reflective practice drawing on existing knowledge can, we hope, support future action. Our aim in offering this article is to share thoughts from our work and discussions with international partners and thereby contribute to the intellectual and practical journey of development of Gestalt theory and practice applied to community/team development.

It is important to specify at this point that by 'community' or 'team/group' we mean the broad view of a collection of people who share something together. As well as physical or geographical communities, therefore, we will here also refer to groups of people sharing and pursuing together a particular socio-political interest, and to groups/teams of practitioners seeking to support each other in their practice. We will define three varieties of organising, COPs, CANs and RCOPs, and describe examples of them and the outcomes we have witnessed. We will also discuss some emerging key conceptual ideas which we think are relevant to Gestalt practice with communities/teams.

COPs, CANs and RCOPs

Practice with communities/teams encompasses a very wide variety of communities, groups, concepts and practices. As such, there is a challenge in conceptualising this diversity in such a way that draws a coherent knowledge base from which to develop practice.

In an effort to gain coherence and help develop Gestalt practice in this area, we will focus our

discussion on three forms of organising that we have direct experience of being used to promote practice, namely Communities of Practice (COPS), Community Action Networks (CANs), and Relational Communities of Practice (RCOPs). The first of these, COPS, does not draw specifically on Gestalt ideas but we have included it here as we feel it offers some interesting insights and comparisons to help develop community/team oriented Gestalt practice. The other two approaches have, to varying degrees, drawn specifically on Gestalt thinking and practice. The following discussion will draw on the conceptual and practical insights we can draw from the three models. Subsequently, we will discuss some key overarching conceptual issues that we think could be vital to developing Gestalt theory and practice successfully with communities/teams.

(i) The classic view of Communities of Practice: COPS

A COP has been defined as ‘a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis’ (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4).

The concept draws on social learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Contu and Willmott, 2003; Roberts, 2006) that sees learning as emerging in social contexts (i.e. it is socially constructed) and as provisional (i.e. evolving over time). It draws our attention to learning as being ‘embodied’ (Contu and Willmott, 2003). This is counter to a view of learning as being individualistic and all knowledge as disconnected from social contexts, and is more closely aligned with Gestalt theory where knowledge/ideas and learning are viewed as deeply embedded components co-emergent from the whole situation (see, for example, Robine, 2003; Wollants, 2008).

Clark et al. (2015, p. 294), as an example, identify the following features of COPS:

- they are places of interaction;
- there is a socially constructed view of knowledge underpinning them;
- participation is important for interaction and exchange;
- this requires members to have a sense of belonging, trust, loyalty and mutual participation;
- there needs to be an ethical commitment to the COP and participants;
- identity and its social construction are important to the COP and members.

Whilst these features focus on the COP itself, Gestalt theory tells us that we must also be attentive to the wider field/context and culture within which an individual COP tries to work. The forces and considerations that

the context brings to a COP and other collaborative modes of work have the potential radically to limit or enhance what is or can be achieved. For example, drawing on research into other modes of collaborative endeavour in the National Health Service (NHS), Bate and Robert (2002) note how the wider hierarchical and project management cultures of the NHS limited the impact of collaborative working. They commented that, to be productive, collaborative endeavours in the NHS needed ‘to become more equal, spontaneous, naturalistic and improvisatory, and less routine, hierarchical, structured and orchestrated’ (Bate and Robert, 2002, p. 659).

Clark et al. (2015), Cornes et al. (2013), and Cornes et al. (2014) discuss the experiences of COPS for those working to support people who are homeless. They identified ways in which other organisational considerations and managerial cultures and practices beyond the COP impinged on how well people could work in and through the COP. Again, Gestalt theory informs us that, since we are products of the relational contact between the person and the environment, the impact of the environment is bound to be huge. In Gestalt theory, we are ‘of the field’ (Perls et al., 1951), not ‘in a field’ as in systems theory. Clark et al. (2015) identified that often the improvements in practice developed by members of the COP were relatively small, something the authors described, positively, as ‘little miracles’. They suggested that in the contextual circumstances this might have been the best scale of improvements that was possible, and nonetheless of vital significance.

These examples raise the issue of whether, and to what extent, COP members should expect, hope or demand that the environment change in order to support their work and outputs more. Whilst the concept of COPS shares much with a Gestalt view, it seems to pay too little attention to the wider context, or field, within which a COP operates. One could all too easily be left with a sense that COPS function largely to support individual practitioners working in hostile environments, rather than acting as high performing groups coordinating to innovate and deliver a variety of excellent interventions in supportive field conditions. At worst, and to return to our original discussion regarding ‘which side of the contact boundary needs to change’, this could be formulated as a community equivalent of the individualistic paradigm where the members are trying to create ‘large miracles’ on their side of the relational boundary, but the environment is either indifferent or hostile to change.

(ii) Community Action Networks (CANs)

In contrast, CANs are a concept describing social movements of people aimed at improving specific

social injustices that many in the group experience directly. CANs tend not to be so explicitly concerned with bringing together trained people in an area of practice as COPs, and are widely recognised as a way of supporting and mobilising community groups. CANs can operate either via face-to-face or as virtual groups and, to our knowledge, are widely used in the United Kingdom health, social and educational systems (see, for example, <<http://www.communityactionderby.org.uk/networks-and-forums/community-action-networks-and-forums>>), and similarly around the globe.

Fairfield (2013) explicitly tied CANs to a form of Gestalt theory and practice that exists to locate change initiatives specifically in the 'environment/field' side of the contact boundary as opposed to requiring individual persons to adapt. In this view, Gestalt practitioners need to be concerned with more than individual, one-to-one therapy and need to 'move from a service provision paradigm to an organising paradigm' (Fairfield, 2013, p. 33). Members of CANs, therefore, work to 'catalyse community building, social action, and leadership development' (*ibid.*, p. 28), as a direct way of creating field conditions where the CAN and its individual members can thrive. Fairfield draws on research demonstrating the importance of social capital and connection (as opposed to loneliness and isolation) to the well-being of people and communities. A specific goal of these CANs, therefore, is 'to improve communities and strengthen the relationships that constitute them' (*ibid.*, p. 22). Classically, COPs have not had this explicitly socio-political agenda.

Through the Relational Center in Los Angeles, Fairfield and colleagues provide training, support and other resources to people to initiate and sustain CANs. An explicit goal is to nurture and sustain change agents to spread the CAN movement further. Through these actions, Fairfield seeks to grow 'coordinated, widespread mobilisation to build an enduring culture of community that promotes belonging and diversity and a viable social infrastructure to sustain that culture' (*ibid.*, p. 29).

Our analysis of this work is that this form of CANs, compared to COPs, is therefore more explicitly concerned with changing environments, but has perhaps not been so explicitly focused on theories about and processes of generating knowledge, practitioner support and learning. Of course, these contrasts represent the different roots of both sets of ideas, but they highlight complementary areas to be attentive to in future Gestalt work with communities/teams.

(iii) Relational Communities of Practice (RCOPs)

In our work at Relational Change, and drawing on previous experience in health and social care, we experimented with establishing both COPs and CANs.

Our experience after two years was that COPs often ended up looking very like peer support/peer practice groups (highly useful, but hardly novel), while CANs seemed to require a level of ongoing social activism, leadership and political will that, in practice, proved hard to resource and sustain without the infrastructure of a formal organisational structure. For example, when previously working within healthcare, I (SDV) had access to venues, a paid leadership role, an agreed 'niche cause' of local health/social care issues, and both collegial and administrative support. Absence of these supports seemed to lead to burnout in CAN leaders and members.

Ultimately, therefore, we determined to prototype a hybrid: a group focused on creating a sense of a safe supportive environment where members could gain relational nourishment and collectively share and generate knowledge and learning (these being, as discussed above, more explicitly COP functions); *and also* receive 'peer coaching' regarding strategies to actively implement projects aimed at changing the environment/building relational capacities in the wider field (a more explicitly CAN focus and function). Our hope is that we have thus attended more explicitly to a balance of support/change on both sides of the contact boundary: person and environment. We now have over two years' experience of prototyping this hybrid that we call a Relational Community of Practice, or RCOP, and share this with the hope of stimulating further debate and development.

The primary methodology of the RCOP concerns nourishing and supporting individual and group action for undertaking a wide variety of projects in the world. Examples of such projects that have emerged from the group will be discussed later, but meanwhile, we would like to share more of our thinking concerning this aim.

To return to our original Gestalt formulation looking at the relationship between organism/person and environment/world, the emphasis in the RCOP is on exploring *both* sides of the contact boundary to see where change might best be leveraged. In other words, the group supports individuals to look at their own motivations, opportunities, resistances and strengths when attempting to develop their work in the world. The group is focused on the situated learning of a COP approach. Additionally, the community actively supports and peer-coaches each other to see where, and how best, practical social support might be gathered and obstacles to change in the environment overcome. The RCOP, then, has an explicit external focus on change in the world as does a CAN.

So far the group has undertaken a wide range of projects, including creating training/leadership opportunities (together and individually), participating in petitioning activities, consulting to

change individually-focused organisational strategy/implementation to more relationally-based approaches, and looking at how individual family systems impact on community networks and functioning. Our overriding sense is that the RCOP has become a vibrant community group where individuals are thriving and motivated to work to change environments so that others can also thrive. Leadership is shared, venues are rotated, and the group seems easy to sustain. Members report feeling supported and empowered to create projects and actively campaign to change restrictive practices/toxic environmental conditions (see testimonies below). As such, we propose this as a minimal cost, high reward option for both building and sustaining individuals within communities. That is not to say that such work is easily achieved.

Examples offered to demonstrate impact of RCOP membership

This section is offered following a brief action inquiry reflective project undertaken by members of the Midlands, UK, RCOP. As such, evidence for impact and efficacy is obviously highly subjective, anecdotal and very preliminary, but, we hope offers pointers to what might be achieved and certainly to what needs to be considered. An earlier attempt to gather more rigorous quantitative data at the encouragement of one author (MC) sadly fell by the wayside as the process of data gathering was determined to impact too negatively on early group process, bonding and spontaneity, leading to a figural sense for some members of the group of 'aiming' for goals and outcomes rather than authentically developing work/projects or supporting members. This had led to resistance and a decision to suspend formal data gathering. Interestingly, some two-and-a-half years into the project, members were willing to reconsider. This raises some important issues concerning appropriate research methodology for such community/team projects, and potentially the need for such research to be in the form of action inquiry that acts as ground for what emerges.

The inquiry question posed to the group was, 'What has the RCOP meant to me and what, if anything, has it supported me to do in my work?' What follows is reproduced with the explicit permission of members of the Midlands RCOP (Vienna Duff, Kate Glenholmes, Gerrie Hughes, Mary Hale, Rosalind Maxwell-Harrison, Jill Ashley-Jones, Jude Jennison, Jean Nash, Miriam Taylor and Sally Denham-Vaughan), and we are very grateful to them for sharing their experience.

Vienna Duff (Psychotherapist)

The RCOP has been a place in which I have experienced dialogue, acceptance, support,

challenge and inspiration. It has supported what I already do as a therapeutic practitioner and challenged me to step out.

I can't say that I would not have done the things I have been involved in over the last two years or so without the RCOP, but I have approached them with greater clarity about values and with confidence in what I am choosing to put my energy towards. I have also clarified 'how' I do what I do, including in work that I do outside the therapy community.

Without Relational Change's series of Liminal Spaces workshops I would not have met Miriam Taylor. This meeting was a catalyst. Developing ideas together since then and with support through the RCOP as well as Relational Change, Miriam and I ran a residential weekend for therapists together in 2016, creating something fresh and new with the wonderful group who participated. So, one liminal process generated another and another and now another ... illuminating the vitality, range and depth of inter-connectedness and principles of relationality.

Kate Glenholmes (Organisational Consultant)

Since joining the RCOP I have moved from a lifelong career working in the public sector to working as an independent consultant. I have felt incredibly supported by our RCOP group, mainly through the inspiration of hearing about work other people are involved with, the confidence with which they approach their projects, and how their commitment to a dialogic approach manifests itself in both their work and life in general. It has felt that my peers understand how I work and the challenges that I face; it is the way they work, part of the values and beliefs that inform and guide their practice.

As I write this I am aware that it may sound as if we spend all our time talking through our work. Occasionally we do this; sometimes we tell stories, and sometimes we look for inspiration in the garden. You see, it's not that my fellow RCOP members have been standing on the sidelines cheering me on – it feels more as if they are running alongside, that we have been keeping each other company, and cheering each other on as we share the same dialogic journey.

Gerrie Hughes (Psychotherapist and Organisational Consultant)

In this digitally connected world, it seems particularly important to have an opportunity to belong to human networks. In our RCOP I have found consistent acceptance, but no bland reassurances. People have been willing to meet in a real way, which can sometimes be challenging, but also provides an opportunity for an authentic

response that is invaluable, yet can be difficult to find.

I find it vital to define my own values, and so make decisions that support my sense of personal integrity. Belonging to a group that generally shares my values, and applies them in day-to-day work and life, allows me to clarify and solidify my priorities, and move forward into action.

I was inspired to introduce Relational Organisational Gestalt principles and practice in my own local area of South Wales. With a colleague from the group, I ran a one-day workshop in February 2016.

In essence, a RCOP can feel like an experiment in high-level relationship skills that offers a well of encouragement and generativity for those willing to be connected.

Rosalind Maxwell-Harrison (Coach and Coach Supervisor)

It is a place where I can be completely relational. All my 'training' taught me about being behavioural. Without the concept of relationship and love – agape – any relationship is tainted with judgement and prior experience. Being part of the RCOP allows me the space to practise that agape with like-minded people who accept me with love. This allows me to practise the same openness and feelings in my professional practice and also with family and friends and acquaintances. I need the space (and loving acceptance) of the RCOP to return me to that place which I want to inhabit at work and at home.

Mary Hale (Therapist/Counsellor)

The RCOP offers a sense of Community by sharing time with others with similar values (open heart, open mind). I believe this expands outwards to create 'energy hotspots', as it were.

For me, it's more about being than doing, but not mere entertainment. I am energised by the meetings and both by receiving and by offering encouragement and moral support.

Jill Ashley-Jones (Coach and Coach Supervisor)

I have been a member of the Relational Change RCOP based in Malvern since its inception and what has delighted me is that although not everyone can get to every meeting the same group of women continue to be active members.

I don't think anyone knew what might emerge from these meetings but all members are 'open' and able to go with what emerges even if this feels initially uncomfortable. This is because a tremendous sense of holding a safe space to explore and voice this uncertainty is engendered by the membership and constantly reinforced by behaviours and attitudes.

I am reminded of the Indian legend of Indira's net sometimes used to illustrate Appreciative Inquiry theory, whereby we are all stars sparkling in the sky but held together by lines of connecting energy that makes us individually stronger as well as affording us to access others' energy freely and lovingly given when and where it is most needed.

Jude Jennison (from Leadership Whisperers)

Being part of the Midlands RCOP has inspired and informed the way I run my own business and encourages me to consider and embrace the practicalities and challenges of Relational Change in work and life.

As my own area of expertise is in leadership, and particularly the role of relationships in leading change and navigating uncertainty, I ran a one-day workshop for the Relational Change community so that they could experience the wisdom of my herd of horses and enhance their leadership skills as they lead their own change in the world. It brought together a mix of coaches and therapists who all shared one common purpose – to lead change in the world and to know that it comes from deepening a sense of self and relating to others in a powerful way. One participant was moved to share her experience of the day: see <<http://learnshedlive.com/fresh-approaches-to-leadership-understanding-part-2/>>.

Reviewing these reflections, our initial sense is that it is possible to identify four repeating themes that would be worthy of further research: first, clarification and confirmation of values; second, appreciation of authentic feedback (critical friends), and opportunity to be authentic; third, sense of being 'well-connected' and all that comes with that (e.g. confirmed, supported, accepted, loved); and, fourth, increase in energy, motivation and mobilisation to create/continue projects and work. It would be good to explore further and understand the links between these aspects of a RCOP and the outcomes achieved by its members. It would also be good to examine whether these are the similarly experienced features of a RCOP or CAN in other contexts, beyond those more directly connected with Gestalt working.

Relating these four emergent themes back to our earlier discussion of the socio-political aspects of change being focused on interventions that make figural either the 'environment/field' or 'person/ individual', it is perhaps unsurprising, given the 'hybrid' aims of this RCOP and the explicitly 'relational' Gestalt thinking behind its development, to see that the themes reflect the need to attend equally to *both* sides of the contact boundary. Certainly, themes two, three and four directly reflect this. What was perhaps less anticipated

was the emergence of the first theme of clarification and confirmation of values. Upon reflection, we would directly relate this to the use of Gestalt as an organising methodology and its insistence upon attendance to the dialogic relationship co-emerging *between* person and environment as a core value. We believe this issue lies at the heart of what makes Gestalt a particularly potent methodology for working with communities and groups and will discuss this more in later sections.

Pragmatic issues with CAN, COP and RCOP structures

We have already discussed some of the methodological and practical issues arising from the three varieties of community organising we have identified in the previous section. Recognising the enormous range of possibilities within each identified variety, we have tentatively attempted to summarise some of the key similarities and differences in Table 1. We recognise that the points in the table are deeply related to our experiences of the three modes of organising and, as such, are provisional and open to debate.

In the spirit of further personal reflection, and to encourage development of community-orientated Gestalt work, we have also taken the opportunity to ask an individual experienced in COPs (Michael Clark), a CAN leader (Mark Fairfield), and a RCOP leader (Sally Denham-Vaughan) their views on ‘three key questions’ relating to each variety of community/team organising intervention. Their responses are captured in what follows.

(1) COPs – Michael Clark

a) *What is the main purpose of the community intervention? (In one sentence)*

To provide a space in which practitioners working in the same area (though often not the same organisation) can share related knowledge and experience and be creative about ways to improve outcomes for people they support.

b) *How are issues of leadership and structure organised?*

Somebody takes responsibility for pulling together the COP, but it is hoped that it will evolve into a network of shared leadership and

Table 1: Properties of COPs, CANs and RCOPs

	COP	CAN	RCOP
Vision/Aims	Excellence in practice – sometimes improved coordination and cooperation on shared cases	Shared community action projects aimed at improving local field conditions for members	Spread of relational values/theories/practices/skills and approaches
Participants	Share a practice base	Share a geographical base and issues for change	Share a commitment to relational values across a range of practices and issues
Leadership	Rotated – usually in paid work time	Shared – usually a funded/paid leader. All members show leadership via story-telling and shared community action	Shared – an unfunded coordinator. All members show leadership via action projects and peer-coaching
Venue	Usually work base	Usually community resource centre	‘Hosting’ function rotated
Costs	Paid by employer	Paid by members/organising body	Covered by host: some action projects donate to organising body
Methodology	Practice/case discussions	Relational Public Narrative – sharing individual stories in a resonant space so the impact of adverse field conditions is appreciated and commitment to community action maintained	Sharing of individual history/issues so that blocks to achieving aims are appreciated and strategies for overcoming these are explored and peer-coached
Key Outputs	Practice improvement and excellence in care/treatment	Member support and reduction in adverse field conditions	Member support and increase in capacity in wider field

vision, mutual respect and trust, and increasingly entwined responsibilities.

- c) *What are the key outcomes you have seen? (Include positive impacts and any unanticipated unwanted effects)*

The most positive impacts have been when practitioners have fully entered into the spirit of the COP and begun to make more honest and open relationships with fellow members. These may be people they have worked 'alongside' for some time, all seeking to support the same group of people, but without previously having opportunities for open discussion and sharing about the nature of each other's work and how it is entwined. The recognition that another practitioner who was previously seen from a little distance as a barrier to getting things done is, when experienced closer up, someone who shares the same values and goals but who is obstructed in fully delivering these by previously unarticulated commitments and requirements can be a powerful moment of connection. These (organisational) barriers may remain but at least they are now in the open. The unwanted effects are when the COP becomes a group isolated from making any real improvements, or when the COP is too much of a time-limited, project-based meeting. In both cases the sense of 'community' is too diluted.

(2) CANs – Mark Fairfield

- a) *What is the main purpose of the community intervention? (In one sentence)*

The purpose of the Community Action Network structure is to equip a small group (8 to 12 participants) of values-aligned change-makers with tools for sustaining commitments to mutual support, collaboration and shared leadership.

- b) *How are issues of leadership and structure organised?*

The structure decentralises responsibility and power, distributing leadership among its participants, while allowing for affiliations and collaborations with other CANs who share a metanarrative or framing story about the most important values to defend through community action.

- c) *What are the key outcomes you have seen? (Include positive impacts and any unanticipated unwanted effects)*

CANs keep their members accountable to their professed values, agitating them to action but grounding them in the support needed to make things happen. I have seen CANs develop into cells of a social movement, organisers of a

campaign and founders of a new organisation. Sometimes CANs can unravel, particularly in the face of interpersonal conflicts and ruptures, owing primarily to the reality that a peer-led, decentralised mutual aid strategy will provide only the basic container for powerful community collaboration, but will not substitute for the leadership of highly-skilled facilitators or other experts called in when things go awry.

(3) RCOPs – Sally Denham-Vaughan

- a) *What is the main purpose of the community intervention? (In one sentence)*

To spread relational ideas, theories and practices into as many areas of life and work as possible.

- b) *How are issues of leadership and structure organised?*

Initially we invited people to meetings and set out a light structure for us getting to know each other and our work by sharing histories and examples of our work. We also talked about what we meant by a 'relational approach', our values and why we felt passionately about developing these ways of living and working. Initially it fell to me to set a focus of each of us discussing our work and exploring how the group might support us in creating new 'relationally orientated' projects. I was also explicit that the group was an experiment for Relational Change in building a community of people who wanted to practise 'relationality' together and spread relational practice. People very readily responded to suggestions that hosting meetings and offering venues should be rotated. Generally now leadership is shared, with us all helping to keep the focus and light structure that we initially contracted. Membership is now closed with a stable group of 10. Attendance fluctuates but averages 8 people meeting bimonthly.

- c) *What are the key outcomes you have seen? (Include positive impacts and any unanticipated unwanted effects)*

I have been delighted at how supportive individuals report finding the group and at how it has stimulated a wide range of relationally focused events/interventions/actions, for example, ways of dealing with specific work issues by broadening the focus, different options for handling family crises, building confidence in writing for publication, etc. Some of the projects have been developed and offered as training events for Relational Change. These have assisted in promoting the work of individual members and of Relational Change and have also provided a small income for the Relational

Change ‘community pot’ (which is used to keep Relational Change running, promote events, fund low cost trainings and offer donations/bursaries at conferences/trainings). The only unanticipated effect has been the occasional loss of focus where we have seen the risk that the group would become a co-counselling or peer therapy group. Keeping a focus on production of actions and peer coaching has avoided that risk.

Key conceptual issues

Having looked at these three models of practice with communities/teams, discussed thematic outcomes and tentatively offered some pragmatic suggestions, we will now draw out three key conceptual issues that, based on our experience, we suggest as core to learning and developing practice in this area. We offer these as areas for further discussion and debate. First, the complex *and* complicated epistemologies operating in community/team work; second, an ontology of authenticity/presence that is essential to ethical community leadership and productive community working; and third, the issue of field and context for situated community/team work. We will discuss each of these in turn, examining them conceptually and offer our initial reflections concerning their relevance to and implications for Gestalt work with and within communities and our discussions so far. Although they are discussed separately here, in practice they are intimately entwined with each other (a gestalt) in work with and within communities/teams.

(i) Complex and complicated epistemologies

Clearly, COPs, CANs, and the hybrid RCOP, share an understanding that there are both complex and complicated epistemologies underpinning their work. This is perhaps most explicit in the situated learning basis of COPs, but in all varieties there is belief that information that is most relevant will co-emerge as membership, context and desired output evolve. There is therefore no room for ‘one size fits all’ thinking as the issues and projects encountered and created are highly complex ones requiring bespoke, dialogic and dynamic responses.

‘Knowledge’ is thus seen as dispersed across the community/team, which creates a challenge to members as they need to dialogue together to appreciate the whole field they collectively inhabit and their differing subjective experiences. This means being attentive not only to codified/explicit knowledge that can be recorded against a tick list or target, but also to the tacit/implicit/embodied knowledge, such as wisdom and experience, lying behind practices. This latter type of knowledge

is at best a shy and humble creature, rarely willing to venture out in community groups/teams unless safety and support are explicitly offered: it has to be called out gently and often. Failure to recognise this has been seen to undermine collaborative work groups in a project management culture in the NHS (Bate and Robert, 2002), where all too often implicit expertise and wisdom was ‘felt’ but squashed rather than developed as the focus became easily codified knowledge. Practitioners in a community/team may therefore feel more secure in expressing formal guidelines rather than their tacit knowledge about clients/issues or in exploring less prescriptive responses to needs.

Thus, we believe that leading/organising COPs, CANs and RCOPs requires what we have termed a ‘relational’ view of leadership (Clark et al., 2014), that is capable of supporting the roles of different types of knowledge, connectedness, dynamism and inter-dependency in a social context, so that all community members are firmly engaged. That is, a form of leadership that is itself comfortable with the intersubjective and co-emergent forms of knowledge that a community/team may, with the right support, develop and begin to enact beyond their codified knowledge.

It is important to clarify at this point that this does *not* reduce knowledge to some relativist ‘mush’ where each and every statement is treated as a solipsistic ‘revelation of truth’. While each view is an important expression of subjective experience, not all views will be resonated with in the community/group, gain traction, or be received as helpful (Mitchell, 2009; Donati, 2011). Rather, expressed views require close, ongoing critical reflection and sensitive discernment regarding their ability to provide ‘support’; formulated here as either ‘relational accompaniment’-COP function (Denham-Vaughan, 2010), or ‘enablement towards goals’-CAN function (Jacobs, 2006).

Understanding and working with both forms of support (accompaniment/enablement) within this complex epistemology potentially allows RCOPs to develop the kinds of co-emergent responses (rather than prescribed ones) to complex needs that Clark et al. (2015) discuss in the context of COPs working with people who are described as ‘complex multiple exclusion homeless’.

Fairfield (2013, pp. 32–3) sets out a framework for the practices of this model of shared community/team leadership, and identifies ‘collaborating’ and ‘cultivating’ as key tasks, which we have summarised below:

Collaborating – developing shared responsibility for strategy/plans/outcomes using key skills of:

- Coordination – of a collaborative plan that is inclusive of the goals and values of members of the group;

- Distribution – or sharing of roles and responsibilities to ensure the community's work is manageable and sustainable;
- Protection – by pooling risk, supporting each other and developing relational wellness.

Cultivating – growing the sources of support and resources that make the community sustainable using key skills of:

- Visioning – developing a shared view of what 'better' would be like and how it can be achieved;
- Organising – or enacting the shared vision through practices that model the desired values and behaviours;
- Sustaining – by coupling values and practices to renewable resources that ensure long-term impact.

Looking at this framework, we would suggest that the first skill set, 'collaborating', has perhaps more immediate value to CAN-type/activist groups, where environmental/field change is targeted as a priority. The second set, 'cultivating', is perhaps more figural for COPS where individual community/team members require relational nourishment and renewal. In our limited experience of the prototype RCOP, a mixed agenda group might get most sustainable and widespread engagement from a leadership style that can rhythmically oscillate across both skills according to the co-emergent identified group need. This is what we would propose as the task of a RCOP, and the skill set that is required for leadership/coordination of such a community.

(ii) The ontology of authenticity and presence

Clark et al. (2015) posit the view that developing authentic relationships between participants in a COP is one of the key active ingredients in making a COP successful. Their concern was that in everyday work contact across boundaries (organisational and professional), people who are ostensibly working in the same area, perhaps even with the same clients/issues, have their relationships mediated by other pressures. This may lead to misunderstandings about many things, including each other's intentions, goals, or goodwill. A worker may, for example, want to help a homeless person with their substance issues, but be facing organisational directives that lead away from this. Another worker from a different organisation may not know about these directives and, hence, may view the first worker as being deliberately obstructive. By spending time together in a COP, with space to think and discuss together freely, workers may come to develop a more authentic interpersonal relationship and understanding of each other's work pressures. New knowledge and solutions may also then emerge.

To return to the Gestalt formulation described at the outset, the relationships in the community improve with increased *contact*: not just physical connection, but appreciation of each other's personal aims *and* environmental situation. Indeed, this is the formulation that has ensured Gestalt is a 'relational' approach since its inception. As members become more present for each other by sharing in a bounded space, the quality of contact/engagement improves. Importantly, according to Gestalt theory, this leads directly to increased energy/mobilisation and ability to act.

But what is it to be present/authentic and to develop authentic relationships? We believe that both authenticity and presence need to be understood as foundational to ontology; a profound way of being in the world. Vitally, we should avoid understanding and communicating them crudely as techniques that can be simply 'picked up', especially in an organisational context (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2011).

Ontologically, authenticity/presence requires two interlinked, complex processes of a person (Guignon, 2004, p. 75), which we have summarised as:

- (i) Introspection to identify and be aware of one's 'real self'; in Gestalt terms, 'subjective embodied experience';
- (ii) Expressing this 'real self or subjective experience' through all actions and interactions.

As Guignon argues, there is much complexity involved in understanding these two processes and their part in conceptions of authenticity, and (we add) of presence. If we view authenticity as being a personal virtue in which there is only a linear process from (i) to (ii), we run into various problems, such as drowning in a life of self-absorption (process (i)) and questions regarding the validity of views if they are purely based on personal introspection ((ii) – solipsism) (Guignon, 2004; Fletcher, 2013).

If, however, we see authenticity/presence as a social values base, and as profoundly dynamic and relational (Fletcher, 2013), with necessary dynamic interaction between (i) and (ii), we see that social relations are integral to the sense of authenticity/presence we hold in our society/community at large. 'Presence' is defined by Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan (2007) as a state of 'energetic availability and fluid responsiveness'. In other words, it is a dynamic, changing state of being, responding to others and the situation in the moment, and responding to the state of being changed. Awareness is an ongoing flow rather than a reflection at a point in time. This is remarkably similar to Erickson's (1995, p. 139) view of authenticity as concerned with 'self-in-relationship'.

In this conception of presence and authenticity, our selves and lives do not just consist of our 'inner

selves and personality traits' but also our manner of 'engaging with the world' (Fletcher, 2013, p. 87). Again, this starts to look remarkably similar to our originally stated Gestalt formulation examining the relationship between 'organism/person' and 'environment/world' as it unfolds in every moment. Indeed, this process describes the Gestalt process of 'selfing', whereby a person co-emerges in dialogic relationship with the environment/context. This can also be seen as very similar to the process of authentically 'becoming'. In other words:

Being authentic is not just a matter of concentrating on one's own self, but also involves deliberation about how one's commitments make a contribution to the good of the public world in which one is a participant. So authenticity is a personal undertaking insofar as it entails personal integrity and responsibility for self. But it also has a social dimension insofar as it brings with it a sense of belongingness and indebtedness to the wider social context that makes it possible. (Guignon, 2004, p. 83)

This sense of engagement/contact with social contexts and processes in which we are immersed:

Proposes not passive quietism in which one does nothing, but an activism that operates with a heightened sensitivity to what is called for by the entire situation. It is a stance that is motivated less by a concern with making than with finding, less by calling forth than being called. In place of the emphasis on calculation and insistence on one's own ends, there is the kind of situational awareness of what should be done that comes readily to those who have cultivated in themselves a sense of decency and compassion. (ibid., p. 84)

In this view, authenticity therefore becomes an emerging dynamic state of values-based action, and emerges when sense of self is radically aligned with and responding to others and the situation. In 2005, I (SDV) formulated this dialectical tension as 'Will and Grace'; and also proposed it was a foundational organising principle at the heart of Gestalt theory and constituting the dynamic process of presence (Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2007). At Relational Change we have attempted to describe this in an easily accessible way using our 'SOS' framework (see Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2013, for further discussion), where 'SOS' refers to Self, Other and Situation, and 'Ethical Presence' emerges when these aspects are in awareness.

In this view, then, presence/authenticity is vital to, and is partly constituted through, the kind of regular immersion in a community of relationships that Fairfield (2013) sees as a part of the vitality of CANs. This is not so explicit in formulations of COPs but, we would argue, is required for an optimally functioning COP, as articulated in the RCOP concept. Then, during '[V]ital, intense discussions, egos fall away and are

replaced by something much more important: the matter that matters' (Guignon, 2004, p. 84).

We would suggest that 'the matter that matters' relates to the ability of the community/team to act together for the greater good of others/situations and the world. This aim now aligns with, and is supported by, the complex and complicated epistemology of Gestalt theory and is manifested in subtly different ways in the COPs/CANs/RCOPs discussed above.

(iii) Context and field

Using a Gestalt formulation focused on the boundary between organism/person and the environment/world, there is a clear need to understand the environment/field conditions, or 'cultural context', within which a COP/CAN/RCOP operates. It is clear that the optimal form of community/team organising emerges in direct relationship to both context and members. The community itself is part of this field, and so too are the organisations and situations in which participants in the community operate and to which they are accountable. As discussed previously, research by Clark et al. (2015) discusses how participants in COPs of people working in the area of homelessness felt constrained in their actions relating to the work of the COP by elements in the field, namely the organisations they worked for and their policies and procedures and their contractual/managerial obligations.

We propose therefore, that it is important that successful community/team action supports the potential to develop alternative perspectives to the dominant ones within a given context, and to cultivate spaces and networks to nurture and explore these alternative perspectives. In the case of COPs, this may mean developing an approach that is counter to managerialist ideas that fragment service support for individuals (Clark et al., 2015; Clark et al., 2014) but which can be openly examined, rather than 'subversively' practised. An example of such subversive practice from a less open culture is the practice observed in homelessness services of staff having secret caseloads, i.e. clients who managerial policies say should be discharged and who formally are, but who staff continue to keep contact with to offer support (Cornes et al., 2013). In the case of CANs, an example may be developing ideas counter to the individualist and consumerist values of current Western society (Fairfield, 2013). In RCOPs it may be either or both, depending on the group members and the situations they are operating under.

Conclusion

In this article we have been concerned with contributing to debate about the degree to which

Gestalt practice is, and can be oriented to, work with and within communities/teams, as well as in individual therapeutic sessions. We have drawn on our experience and literature concerning three models of working with and within communities, namely COPs, CANS and RCOPs. They overlap in some respects but each is distinct in its history and explicit focus of what the model is seeking to address and how to achieve this. We have endeavoured to draw out some of these features, and to compare and contrast, and highlighted three key conceptual areas for thought, in order to bring into debate themes that a Gestalt mode of practice with communities/teams might need to consider.

We have proposed in this article that authenticity/presence is necessarily present in healthy communities/teams, whether the focus of these communities/teams is healthier individuals and/or healthier environments. We have suggested that Gestalt methodology and skills, with their foundational emphasis on the quality of contact/relationship between person and environment, could be a very helpful modality in achieving such authenticity/presence. We have also highlighted that the flexibility of the Gestalt approach, with its insistence on awareness of differences in cultural context as well as individuals, is adaptable to a vast range of situations. Since communities/teams can be either high cost/low reward settings, or the opposite, we have argued that it is vital to have a working model and approach that can address these issues that we formulate as essentially relational, as well as strategies for coordinated action when needed. To achieve this we propose that it is important to fully understand the underpinning ontological and epistemological issues we have discussed above, and to explore them in any specific context and mode of COP, CAN, RCOP, or any other community/team development approach.

Through a more Gestalt oriented understanding of community organising we hope people are more able to create environments that best enable the dual processes of Cultivating and Collaborating that Fairfield (2013) proposes organise communities. In suggesting this, we would agree with Scharmer (2007) who, when discussing Theory U, argues that leadership within communities requires two key factors:

- (1) Leaders who convene the right sets of players (frontline people who are connected with one another through the same value chain), and (2) a social technology that allows a multi-stakeholder gathering to shift from debating to co-creating the new. (2007, p. 12).

COPs, CANS and RCOPs share these factors, although perhaps emphasise them more or less. They also draw on the profoundly interdependent nature of human life and, we have argued, therefore thrive best within

a Gestalt field-relational perspective where principles of interconnection, co-emergence and presence can be directly addressed theoretically *and* practically. In other words, these forms of communities/groups seek to develop positive bonds between participants that can be a basis for individual and collective action aimed at social improvements. These bonds are based on inclusivity, trust and reciprocity in recognising and validating each other. Out of this grows a sense of personal presence, potency and authentic relationships – recognising each other's sincerity, strengths and views, and the limitations imposed on people to do things in certain ways within some organisations/contexts. From this comes the opportunity, though, to also see the spaces for doing things differently and making a difference.

In summary, we have suggested that a Gestalt framework addresses the complexity of relationships within a community/team, has the dynamism to accommodate how relationships and contexts flex over time as competing situations call for action, and enshrines cultural/contextual attention and responsiveness. We have offered our insights and the Relational Change SOS framework as possible ways of helping communities/teams look at their functioning and how they act together to promote individual, group and community thriving. We hope that in this paper we have shared and reflected upon our experience and that debate will be stimulated within our own, and other, knowledge communities.

Notes

1. See <<http://www.relationalchange.org/affiliated-centres.html>>.

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