

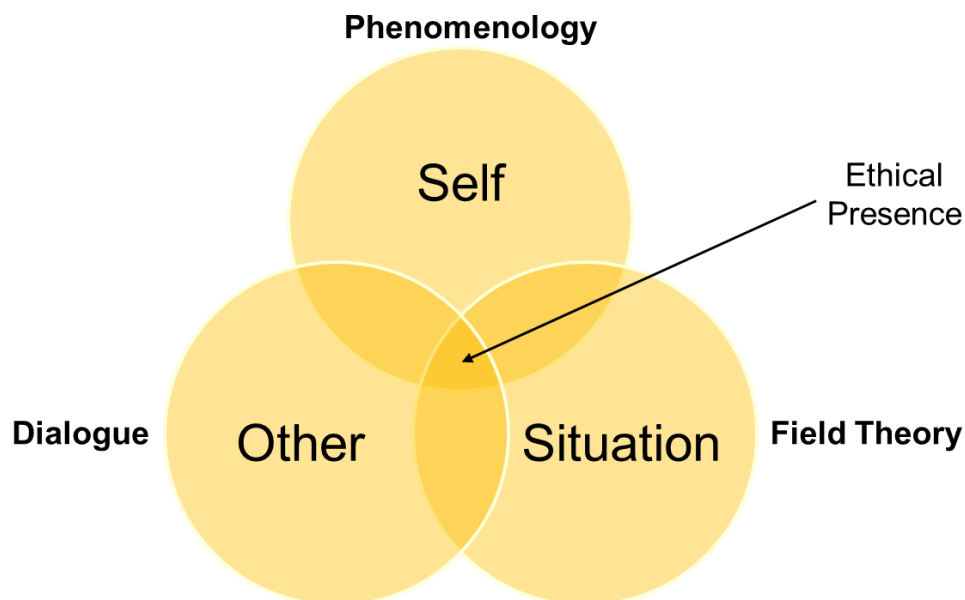
Ethics, dialogue and small acts of great significance

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As the co-founders of Relational Change, we are honoured and delighted to be asked to contribute to this collection of articles in recognition of Giovanni Salonia's work. We recognise a true pioneer in the field of Relational Gestalt work who has highlighted the vital importance of context and relationships in formation of individual health. For example, in 1991, Salonia drew attention to the foundational importance of the quality of a couple's relationship to individual wellbeing. More recently and with colleagues, he highlighted the importance of the whole family system in underpinning a child's healthy development, (Salonia et al, 2013). In this way, we see Salonia's work as an exemplar of the statement by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, (1951), that, "we consider the self as the function of contacting the actual transient present", (P 371) and thus a direct function of the whole field.

We resonate with Salonia's highlighting of the significance of stable, secure, appreciative and harmonious field conditions for healthy development. Indeed in the Relational Change framework that we refer to as the "SOS model", (Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2013), we emphasise the vital importance of ground conditions for healthy figure formation. In this framework (shown in figure 1), we discuss three overlapping processes of first, self-organisation, second, relationships with others and third, aspects of the situation¹. These correspond respectively to the three pillars of Gestalt theory; phenomenology, dialogue and field theory.

FIGURE 1



¹ Our model can also be seen to correspond to the 3 foundational concepts of Heraclitus; a concept of the commons, of the logos and of the cosmos. In other words, each individual one of us participates in a communality, living with one another and acting on another, (self-lens) knowing and thinking in accordance with the logos, (other/dialogic lens) within a cosmos/world, (situation) (see Agassi 1999 for more information).

Of particular significance in a contemporary “relational” approach is the figure-ground organisation of these three elements. Our experience of western culture is of a tendency to operate within an individualised theory of change. Such a theory tends to privilege, or foreground, individual self-organisation as leading to healthy relationships with other which then impacts on the wider field. We refer to this flow (Self->Other->Situation) as the *egological* model of change. In “worst case” scenarios this leads to attention to first meeting “my needs” and predation on others and the wider field as “resources” that might be of use, (see Staemmler, 2009, for further details). Indeed, some might describe Western hyper-capitalism as an extreme version of such an ethic. In contrast, we advocate for the *reversal* of this movement or flow (Situation->Other->Self). Here we examine the whole field/situation first since, like Salonia, we believe the quality of the field and conditions of ground *pre-configure* the quality of relationship with others and thereby organise individual experience. We describe this as an *ecological* model of change and one that we suggest emphasises Buber’s, (1999), famous phrase “no soul is sick alone”. (P 21)

We recognise that in praxis, theories of change applying to both directions of flow are often operating simultaneously. Indeed, our privileging of the ecological approach can be viewed as a corrective of the tendency to individualised formulations of health or pathology. In either case, and in common with Salonia, we would see the leverage point for maximum healthy intervention lying in exploring our relationships with others. In the Relational Change framework, this means examining the dialogical processes and ethical attitudes that are configuring our relationships and encounters. It is in this sphere that we believe there can be many “small acts of great significance,” with each of these small acts highlighting an aspect of the dialogical relationship and ethical attitudinal stance.

Dialogical processes - an ethical stance of co-emergence

In 1989, Lynne Jacobs outlined four core conditions flowing from Buber’s, (1965b, 1970), dialogical theory that she believed could be usefully developed within the Gestalt psychotherapy field: these four aspects being referred to as presence, inclusion, confirmation and commitment to genuine dialogue. Gaining inspiration from Jacobs’ work we have written on the topic of presence (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan 2007, Denham-Vaughan & Chidiac 2017) and the importance of inclusion (Denham-Vaughan & Chidiac, 2013). What is less familiar in our writing and indeed, in the Gestalt literature is an emphasis on the dialogical stance of ‘confirmation’ and ‘commitment to genuine unreserved dialogue’. It is our assessment that Salonia has focussed significantly on these aspects of Gestalt theory and we offer this paper as a tribute and appreciation of his work.

Jacobs, (1989), writes “in dialogue, there is a special insight or illumination in the personally experienced confirmation of oneself by another.” Quoting Buber (1965b) she states “*confirmation means that one is apprehended and acknowledged in one’s whole being*”. We are not confirming what the other person might do, know or contribute to a situation, but rather confirming that their very *presence* is in itself both necessary and sufficient for us to welcome them and receive them whole heartedly. In this way, we would propose that confirmation requires a self-organisation that confirms the ontic significance of the other’s presence for me. Indeed Buber, (1965b, p71), states “for the inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man’s relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other, between men, that is, pre-eminently in the mutuality of the making present”. Indeed central to Buber’s understanding of evil is recognising that while good comes from a dedication to walking the moral path, one falls into evil through an absence of attention, (Friedman 1955, p103).

Confirmation could therefore be conflated with appreciation of another, but we would argue that it is a different process; one that is ontic not epistemic, and ethical not behavioural. Confirmation is not a process that requires observation of the other’s behaviour and appreciation of significant acts, but rather a self-organisation focussed on becoming present and open to the other’s being and becoming as we co-emerge with them in the present moment.

In other words, confirmation is an ongoing stance which recognises our ontic embeddedness in a common field from which we co-emerge and self-organise. And that common field is full of infinite possibilities which we glimpse, celebrate and unfold together in meeting.

We would suggest that appreciation can support confirmation but, and vitally, appreciation of acts is *not* sufficient for the other to feel confirmed in their being and becoming. In this way, we would argue that small acts of confirmation can have great impact. They indicate that a person is wanted for their “being” and welcomed by the field, as opposed to being needed for what they might functionally contribute to an ongoing task. It is clear from Salonia et al’s (2013), work that this is how they wish to impact family constellations, so that children feel welcomed to be who they are becoming.

The fourth condition of a dialogical and ethical stance, “genuine and unreserved communication” has perhaps been one of the most misunderstood areas of Gestalt practice. Historically, it often led to a so called “authentic” or “if I think it, I’m going to say it” unbounded and undisciplined way of behaving. But Buber certainly did not mean by ‘unreserved’ a kind of unbridled “authentic” self-expression which focuses on an individualistic phenomenology rather than how this might be received by the other. This would be in direct contradiction of Buber’s dialogical principles.

Buber (1970) states very clearly that a therapist “*must stand not only at his own pole of the bipolar relationship but also at the other pole, experiencing the effects of his own actions*”. (p.719). It is thus very clear that the authenticity being suggested is one that is filtered and selected within a basic ethical attitude of inclusion of the Other. This is wholly different than authenticity that is focussed on expression of just my “side” of the dialogue. Indeed, Lynne Jacobs, (1989, p10), states “*what must be unreserved is the person’s willingness to be honestly involved and to say what one believes will serve to create conditions for dialogue or further the ongoing dialogue, even if one is fearful of how this will be received*”. In other words, practitioners must say those things which would diminish their participation were they to be withheld. If not saying something is affecting my ability to be present, then it needs to be said.

It is interesting to note that in Yontef’s (2002), writing about the Relational Attitude, the fourth condition for dialogue alongside presence, inclusion and confirmation is what he calls “commitment and surrender to the between” (P 25). By this he means more than self-expression and listening to the other, but a commitment to the between of dialogue in which each party relinquishes ‘control’ and allows for co-emergence. He goes on to write that when the practitioner commits to what emerges in the contact, then the ground conditions for growth and healing are created. This is similar to what Bloom (2005) points to when he states that “uncertainty without anxiety is the achievement of the aesthetic of commitment” (p87). The dialogic commitment is not a commitment to communicating per se but instead a commitment to the spontaneous development and formation of the co-emerging figure of the dialogue, (Bloom, 2017).

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, we wish to highlight here our appreciation of the work that has been undertaken by the Gestalt community to highlight the importance of ethical self-organisation in relation to the Other. In the Relational Change SOS framework, we describe this self-organisation as occurring at the apex of the alignment of attention to self, other and situation and refer to this as a state of Ethical Presence. In this state, there is a willingness to be open, to surrender and indeed even to be taken over by the other in the manner described by Levinas, (1961), as elevating the other, or “the curvature of intersubjective space” (P 267/291). We would argue that these ethical attitudes organise the ground of our meeting with others in a way that facilitates genuine co-emergence and supports being and becoming. It is the inspiration we have taken from this aspect of Salonia’s work, be that in relation to supporting couples, families or individuals that we wish to celebrate and honour in this article.

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