

Paul Goodman and the Gestalt theory of self

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Paul Goodman contributed to the Gestalt theory of self in a number of ways, not least by extending some of Fritz Perls' founding insights and further distancing the theory from its psychoanalytical underpinning. His seminal text *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (co-authored with Perls and Ralph Hefferline, 1951) introduced the ideas of 'creative adjustment' and the 'autonomous criterion', which are central to his own, more nuanced perspective.

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My theme is the Gestalt theory of self, a central Gestalt theme for both Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman, and the contributions Paul Goodman brought to the theme as an extension of Perls' thinking, making it the central plank of the whole of Gestalt theory. As a relational theory, the way Goodman developed it was intimately connected with his political and social concerns. Whereas Freud would have seen himself as a member in good standing of respectable society (even if some of his ideas were seen as scandalous), Goodman and Perls saw themselves as part of a cultural and political avant-garde challenging the beliefs and practices of that society; and of course Perls had to flee Germany, a state that was becoming murderously criminal. Goodman also saw the American state apparatus as murderously criminal in its war in Vietnam and its violent repression of dissent.

So while, for Freud, the conflict between society's demands and people's desires (Superego and Id, in analytic terms) was best resolved by sublimation of raw desires into more acceptable forms, for Goodman and Perls there was creativity in the conflict, so that society could also be changed to better enable people to fulfil their desires. Neurosis, for them, can be the consequence of a 'good' adjustment to society, not just of a 'poor' adjustment.

The interaction between Perls' ideas and the theory as written by Goodman is an intriguing one. The story is that Perls wrote a manuscript that he hired Goodman to expand. As far as I know, that original manuscript is no longer in existence. However, we have several early writings in which Perls developed his ideas, which have now been collected together in a single volume (Perls, 2012). Fritz Perls didn't tend to speak or write in very different ways in different contexts, so these can give a fair sense of what he was thinking at that time.

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Throughout his writing, Perls makes a vital distinction between ‘self’ and ‘self-concept’, or ‘character’ or ‘personality’. Self, for Perls, grows by assimilation from experience, and when this can happen relatively freely, the more deliberate styles and learnings we adopt enhance the spontaneous functioning of self. On the other hand, if we introject a character that is merely convenient or safe, we lose what Perls (1947) calls ‘the feel of myself’ and find ourselves fixed in an inflexible character, maintained by distorted contacting and blind spots in awareness. So, rather than Superego being in conflict with the Id drives, as in psychoanalysis, Perls saw it being in a battle for survival and dominance with another artefact, an ‘Infraego’, or ‘topdog’ and ‘underdog’ as he was already calling it in 1951, and the organismic wants and needs get lost in the battle.

Put in a slightly different way, in this period Perls is reaching towards an understanding of self as arising from, and then directing, contact.

[Federn’s] mistake is that he considers the Ego as a substance with boundaries, while in my opinion, only the boundaries, the places of contact, constitute the Ego. Only where and when the Self meets the ‘foreign’ does the Ego start functioning, come into existence, determine the boundary between the personal and the impersonal ‘field’. (Perls, 1947, p. 169)

It is useful to show where Perls had got with that a few years later, by looking at a lecture he gave at the Cooper Union in New York City in 1957. Here he gave a very clear exposition of a field-relational approach to the self:

... the field is, like in modern physics, the basis of Gestalt therapy. We are here in a field ... The self is that part of the field which is opposed to the otherness. You see, you can look for the self. Does the ‘self’ exist? Does the ‘I’ exist? Can you dissect the brain and find the ‘I’, or the ‘super-ego’, or the ‘self’? Definitely not ... Now the ‘self’ cannot be understood other than through the field, just like day cannot be understood other than by contrast with night ... the ‘self’ is to be found in the contrast with the otherness. There is a boundary between the self and the other, and this boundary is the essence of psychology. (Perls, 2012, pp. 144–145)

Enter Paul Goodman

So this was essentially what was handed to Paul Goodman to work with. What did he do with it? I think what he did was quite extraordinary. He took Perls’ intuition of self and other as co-emergent, and expanded it into a theory of self and a theory of contacting, coupled with an insistence that these two are the same theory, and central to the therapy: ‘Thus the theory of the self develops directly with the therapy of the self’ (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1994/1951 [hereafter ‘PHG’], p. 166). Goodman firmed up Perls’ discussion of Ego, Id, Superego, unconscious and other psychoanalytic terms in a new way that better fitted a field-relational approach rather than an intrapsychic one. He put together Perls’ ideas on ‘adjustment’ with his views on ‘creativity’ to produce the idea of ‘creative adjustment’ as a central theme. And he took Perls’ idea of ‘the feel of myself’, a terminology that never quite fitted with Perls’ developing views of self as relational, and turned it into a much more meaningful concept: the ‘autonomous criterion’, and a theory of neurosis. I shall write of these in turn.

Theory of self and contacting

Self, in Goodman's writings, is not a given, a central manager who surveys the possibilities and decides what will happen next. Rather, it is a function, a 'synthetic unity', the maker of meaning, the 'artist of life'. Let us take this step by step. In any episode of a human being contacting some environmental other, there is a consideration which does not occur in any other kind of engagement in nature. I engage intentionally, with a sense of what is here and now important and meaningful, and a sense of in what way I enter that engagement in fulfillment of that intentionality.

As I stand in this room, I intend a particular relationship with you that involves me presenting, and you (I hope) intend a relationship involving receiving and responding to that presentation. I could have entered as someone looking for a room, as a lighting engineer, as someone who wanted to steal people's bags, or many other possibilities. This would have become visible if I had entered the wrong room, and you had changed from being receivers of my presentation to people wondering what I was doing here! So that is the broad outline of my intentionality; but more than this happens. As I enter this contacting process with another human being, I become aware of you, just as you become aware of me, and we make a unique dance of how we will be together.

Every group, every audience, every contact, is different, and I experience myself in relation to each other in a somewhat different way. Self actualizes in the contact. And I also bring my assimilation of many different contacts into the present contact situation. In this case, I bring my previous experiences of presenting, the ideas I have formed through my training and reading and discussion, and also my assimilated attachment experiences from my earliest years, much of which is completely unverbilized. This assimilation can at various times be a support or a drag, in the very accurate American way of describing it. At the start of a contacting sequence, we always hover between our capacity to approach a situation freshly and our capacity to make use of our previous assimilations. Some people find a balance that supports experiment and liveliness; others have not assimilated enough early support and warmth, in relation to the fear and pain they have had to face, to feel able to do that, and they limit both their contacting styles and their awareness of their environment to what seems familiar and survivable, even if it is also painful.

So all this happens in the first moments of contacting, and affects how I bring myself to the contact, how I experience the other and, if the contact is with another person, how that person experiences me and brings him/herself to the contact. From this initial engagement an interesting, emotionally energized figure of the other begins to develop, and also a background which either supports the figure or diverts energy from the figure into anxiety or self-monitoring, or into an ongoing search for threats, or praise, or sex. In approaching this figure, I get a sense of myself and my active agency in my developing interest. If my background allows me enough energy and focus, the environmental figure and my interest form a single gestalt where any consideration of what is me and what is other becomes background; and as I finish and withdraw from the contact, the new experience can be assimilated to help orientate my future actions.

In this process, we can see the beautiful mixture of ongoingness and changeability that characterizes the Gestalt view of self. It shows how our self-experience can be quite different in different parts of our lives, how we can change, and how we can

fix ourselves defensively. It shows how the growing and diminishing of self cannot be separated from the process of contacting and withdrawing.

Self functions

Coming from a psychoanalytic background, Fritz Perls used the terminology of Freud's standard model: Id, Ego, Superego. He was already recasting ideas of Ego in terms of approaching and distancing, and Superego as half of a topdog/underdog battle. However, it fell to Goodman, also influenced by, but critical of, psychoanalysis, to develop these innovations in a systematic manner, one that emerges from the understanding of self in and as contacting.

So Id becomes, in Goodman's conception, not the reservoir of intrapsychic drives, but of potential encounters as a person approaches a situation, that appear as undirected, vague and 'hallucinatory'. In the language of contact, this is called 'forecontact'. 'The body looms large' (PHG, p. 159), rather than being experienced as energized and embodied self in engagement. As for myself, I would see it as a kind of field awareness, 'the Id of the situation', as the French Gestaltist and writer Jean-Marie Robine calls it. It is the crucible of the possible ways I can enter the situation: confidently or unconfidently, purposefully or open to what comes, and so on. If a person does not allow this moment of non-attachment, s/he will only be able to move to a stereotyped figure rather than one that emerges from the totality of the situation.

Ego refers to the identifications and alienations that firm up the figure and the sense of self in engagement with other. This is very different from the unfocused experiencing in the meeting of organism with environment. These identifications and alienations operate on two levels: identification of the figure of interest and alienation of background; and identification of self and alienation of other. I become myself in relation to that aspect of otherness that I make figural. As opposed to the passivity and receptiveness of Id, Ego is active, contactful and choiceful. In the language of contact, this is the stage of 'contacting' towards 'final contact', a full engagement with Other.

Personality refers to the fixed points that I take as belonging to self through assimilation or introjection. In the language of contact, this assimilation occurs in the period called 'post-contact'. What is called 'self-awareness' is really awareness of personality, which can be described: I am a Gestalt therapist, husband of Mary, living in Manchester etc. Otherwise, self is only known through engagement with the other. To Personality belongs commitments, values, and ways of doing things, as well as false identifications with the familiar, even if the familiar is self-defeating. Personality gives a sense of ongoingness to self, though it is important to realize that this is not as solid as it seems. Personality identifications can change radically quite quickly, and often cause a destabilization of the sense of who I am, as in situations of bereavement, retirement, children leaving home, loss of job, among refugees, and of course also in therapy! The 'me' that I can point to as my ongoing self is not the same as the 'me' I pointed to 10 years ago.

Once again, the agency of the Ego aspect of self can be orientated by the freshness and spontaneity of Id and the autonomy and clarity of Personality in different measures at different times. So the theory of self truly follows from the theory of therapy, slowing down the awareness (Ego) in areas where Personality appears fixed

and unsupportive, fostering openness to what is here right now (Id) and allowing what becomes interesting to emerge (Ego), allowing new assimilations to Personality.

Creative adjustment

In PHG, Goodman emphasizes the way creativity and homeostasis are two sides of the same coin, rather than polar. The situation is always changing, and adjustment can never be back to what was before. Each equilibrium must be a new one, achieved in ways that are consistent with the situation as it is. An example can be riding a bicycle, where there is continuous adjustment of balance, but always to the ground as it is – smooth, bumpy, wet, sloping etc. An adjustment that would work in one situation would lead to you falling off in another.

This creativity also applies to fixed ways of being. To see yourself as rejected by others, unless you are completely psychotic, needs a creative way of engaging with the people who are around you that has to be geared to the place where you are. You may see someone talking to someone else and glancing at you, and then apply your creativity to interpret the scene as people saying nasty things.

The ‘autonomous criterion’

Fritz Perls’ intuition was that we can tell when we are true to ourselves; we can tell by the ‘feel’, what he called ‘the feel of ourselves’. But it isn’t really the feel of ourselves, but the feel of our contacting. Goodman expanded this intuition into a grand idea. A major theme of PHG (1951) is that the therapist should not come to the therapy with a sense of how the client should be in the world, and impose that on the client. Yet it is helpful to have some criterion of healthy or unhealthy functioning. The ‘autonomous criterion’ sidesteps the idea of healthy or unhealthy actions, and goes to the aesthetic character of the figures formed. If it is clear, energized, connected, the person is bringing their full being to what is in the field, and will do their best in that situation. If it is unclear, energy-less, dull, disconnected, then there is some aspect of the field that is not being attended to by a client who is adjusting themselves to avoid noticing the difficulty, which is therefore habitually out of awareness, and needs to be stayed with in order to bring out the full possibilities of the person in the situation. The latter situation forms the theory of neurosis in Gestalt therapy. This idea provides an orientation of the therapist’s area of expertise in the situation, while not making the client conform to what the therapist thinks is right. It is how the action is reached, and the aesthetic qualities of the reaching, that is significant.

Self and society

Paul Goodman was first and foremost a political and social activist and thinker (and this is how I first came across him when I was involved in the campaign against the Vietnam War), and his social philosophy pervades his psychological writings. You can see how the anarchist Goodman moves away from self as a central manager and into self as an organizing function. Whereas for Perls, any fixed personality or character was a moving away from the now, Goodman’s understanding was much more nuanced. Whatever his other sexual encounters, he remained a family man, whereas Perls left his family.

Goodman the anarchist also saw people as combining to create a functioning society, not just having one imposed on them, nor just having immediate encounters. He wrote in PHG about the everyday neurosis caused by trying to 'be normal' in a skewed society. This led to his understanding of 'creative adjustment', combining continuity and change into a single act of becoming, and the 'autonomous criterion' rather than the therapist directing the client towards some 'normal adjustment'. The Gestalt theory of self, as Goodman developed it, supports a human being to engage in, co-create and critique their society and culture, both to emerge from the field and to be an individual. Therapy is a support for this process, not a way of adjustment to society, nor support for an isolated individual.

The client, not constrained by an indwelling self or a therapist's theory of how s/he should be, is viewed as potentially able to place themselves in the world in many different ways, sometimes radically different from how they have previously viewed themselves and been viewed by others. I have seen this happen with clients in sometimes startling ways (socially anxious clients taking positions of leadership; people discovering their creativity in unexpected ways). For the therapist as well as the client, these possibilities keep a sense of excitement and unpredictability in the therapeutic field.

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