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THE ORGANIZATIONAL GESTALT - IMAGES OF ORGANIZATION REVISITED

Max Visser

Introduction

Gestalt theory has known (and still is involved in) many applications in a variety of scientific fields. Initiated by the treatise of VON EHRENFELS on „Gestaltqualitäten“, Gestalt theory made important inroads in early twentieth century Continental philosophy (HEIDER, 1970; SMITH, 1988). Some twenty years later WERTHEIMER introduced Gestalt theory in the field of experimental psychology, from which the Berlin school of Gestalt psychology emerged (KOFFKA, 1935; KÖHLER, 1947; WERTHEIMER, 1938). This school inspired further extensions of Gestalt theory to interpersonal relations and group processes, leading to the formulation of field theory (LEWIN, 1948, 1951), attribution and balance theories (HEIDER, 1944, 1946, 1958; HEIDER & SIMMEL, 1944) and cognitive dissonance theory (FESTINGER, 1957, 1964), besides more comprehensive approaches to social psychology in general (ASCH, 1952; KRECH & CRUTCHFIELD, 1948). Other applications of Gestalt theory reached the fields of neurology (GOLDSTEIN, 1939, 1940) and psychotherapy (PERLS, HEFFERLINE & GOODMAN, 1973), while parts of the political and social sciences also underwent Gestalt influences (see the examples in VISSER, 1994ab).

Impressive as the spread of Gestalt theory may be, Gestalt theoretical analyses of *organizations* as macro-phenomena are still rather uncommon in the field. With a few exceptions (for example, BLANCK & TURNER, 1987; KARP 1997; RUNDE, 1997), a Gestalt point of view is generally absent in the organization and management literature. To be sure, questions of part-whole relationships and system dynamics are central to any theory of organization, yet in the literature these questions have generally been treated in theoretically diverse ways that are often considered paradigmatically incompatible to one another. It is the main argument of this paper that a Gestalt theoretical approach may serve to achieve a fair amount of theoretical integration between various ways of analyzing organizations.

This argument will be developed as follows. First, it will be argued that organizations are weak Gestalten, which depend for their phenomenal existence upon the subjective articulation of the observer. The variety of articulations which naturally occur among different observers have fairly recently been acknowledged as an important tool in organizational diagnosis and (re)design, each articulation creating one

of various images (or metaphors) of organization (MORGAN, 1986). As a second step, a specific interpretation of the Gestalt concept is offered, with the assistance of which several current metaphors are reinterpreted and integrated in terms of a more general Gestalt image of organization. Finally, conclusions are drawn and results are put in perspective.

Images, articulations and experiences

Quite early Gestalt theorists recognized the existence of natural parts in part-whole relationships, i.e. parts that manifest a relative insensitivity to isolation. Naturally, a whole consisting of such natural parts is a „weak' Gestalt, in which a low coherence between parts is accompanied by a high cohesion within parts. Such weak (or dependent) Gestalten are most prominent in the sphere of social wholes, like groups and organizations. Human beings are natural parts of these wholes, resisting facile superordination. Perceiving social wholes as unitary objects requires a definite act of subjective articulation on the part of the perceiver (SMITH, 1988, p. 55-56).

Koffka was among the first to apply the notion of articulation to Gestalt formation: „When the organism is active...it will produce good articulation; when it is passive...it will produce uniformity“ (KOFFKA, 1935, p.173). The degree to which the figure emanates from the ground is dependent upon the attitude (or ego) of the observer. The same phenomenon was noted by Goldstein in connection to the Rubin reversible figure: when the figure is observed passively, oscillation appears very rapidly; when observed with a more interested attitude, lability lessens considerably (GOLDSTEIN, 1940, p.19-20).

Images of organization then may be regarded as ego-based articulations of social wholes that are generally known under a certain organizational name or label. Since articulations differ from one (skilled) observer to another, the organization and management literature is replete with organizational images and metaphors. Recently a number of them have been classified under more general headings in order to serve as tools of organizational analysis and (re)design (MORGAN, 1986).

Organization do not only exist in the eye of the external beholder, though; they are also part of the subjective experiences of the organization members themselves. Having identified these members as natural parts of the organizational whole, it may be concluded that the coherence of that whole depends upon the sense of loyalty and identification the members feel towards the whole. Put somewhat differently, the „empirical' Gestalt of an organizational whole increases, the more the inherent properties and immanent qualities of the members are utilized as co-determinants of their positions in the organizational whole (ANGYAL, 1941, p.243; SMITH, 1988, p.56).

Images and subjective experiences of organization may be related to one another as follows. Images are individual-based articulations of organizations, based on an external point of view. As such they have no necessary relationship to the

empirical Gestalt of the organization involved. However, as tools of organizational diagnosis and (re)design these images may, under appropriate circumstances, serve to enhance the goodness of this organizational Gestalt, i.e. to increase the levels of loyalty and identification members feel toward their organization.

Many images and metaphors already exist, taken from a wide variety of scientific sources and fields. It is the contention of this paper that a fair number of these images may be integrated on the basis of a specific analysis of the Gestalt concept, undertaken in the next section.

Gestalten and functional wholes

In order to apply the Gestalt concept to the study of organizations, it is necessary to deviate from the strictly psychological implications of the concept and to adopt a more philosophical approach. Such a deviation is not only necessitated by the essentially suprahuman nature of organizational wholes, but may also be informed by a perceived lack of philosophical clarification of Gestalt principles within the field of psychology (SMITH, 1988, p.69-72).

In his philosophical treatise on „Gestaltqualitäten“ VON EHRENFELS specified three criteria for the existence of a Gestalt. The first criterion refers to the unilateral dependence of a Gestalt on its basis (or fundament). The existence of objects that form the basis of the Gestalt is a necessary prerequisite for the existence of the Gestalt itself, but the reverse is not true: a Gestalt cannot exist without constituent elements. The second criterion is concerned with supersummativity, often expressed in the statement that the Gestalt is more than (or different from) the mere sum of its parts: it is a property of a whole which cannot meaningfully be ascribed to the totality of the parts making up that whole. The third and final of the Ehrenfels criteria concerns the notion of transposition, which refers to all kinds of modification of wholes in which some aspect of form remains constant: a melody played in different keys is a classic example here (SIMONS, 1988).

The Austrian philosophers GRELLING & OPPENHEIM applied a rigorous logical analysis to the Gestalt concept, as proposed by VON EHRENFELS and amended by the Berlin Gestalt school. On the basis of this analysis they drew a distinction between the concepts of „Gestalt“, satisfying all three EHRENFELS criteria, and „functional whole“, conforming only to the first two conditions.

With regard to the latter, GRELLING & OPPENHEIM introduced the auxiliary concept of determinational system (or system of reciprocal determination) in order to account for the nature of functional wholes. An example of such a system is KÖHLER's charged and isolated conductor: the whole under consideration is the field containing the charges, the parts are the field elements that reciprocally determine each other through the influence of the field's forces (KÖHLER, 1947, pp. 60). In this respect the functional whole may be contrasted to the aggregate whole, in which reciprocal determination between the parts approaches or equals zero (cf.

WERTHEIMER's „Und-Verbindung“). Put differently, whereas the functional whole is characterized by a high degree of interdependence among its parts, the aggregate whole reveals a high level of independence among constituent parts, whereby inter-and independence may be regarded as two poles of one continuum (GRELLING & OPPENHEIM, 1988ac).

Characteristic of a determinational system is the fact that its internal processes depend upon the topographical boundaries of the system, but at the same time take place independent of the nature of that system. These processes tend toward a state of stationary equilibrium, according to which the distribution of parts and forces display a tendency towards equalization or balance. In Gestalt psychology this tendency appears as the law of „Prägnanz“ or „good“ Gestalt, which „relates resulting stationary organizations to certain maximum-minimum principles... A minimum simplicity will be the simplicity of uniformity, a maximum simplicity that of perfect articulation“ (KOFFKA, 1935, p.171). Following the third EHRENFELS criterion, it would not be correct, however, to suppose that only equilibrated functional wholes are Gestalten, since imbalanced distributions can be equally well transposed as balanced ones. This point constitutes the distinction between the functional whole and the Gestalt (GRELLING & OPPENHEIM, 1988ac; see also GOLDSTEIN, 1939, pp.380).

In order to satisfy all three EHRENFELS criteria, GRELLING & OPPENHEIM formally defined the Gestalt concept as: „The Gestalt (of a complex with respect to a correspondence) is the invariant of transpositions (of the complex with regard to the correspondence)“ (GRELLING & OPPENHEIM, 1988a, p. 196).

The following auxiliary definitions may serve to clarify this main definition of Gestalt:

- a) *Transposition*: an operation which takes one complex into another which stands in a given correspondence to it.
- b) *Correspondence*: a relation between complexes conforming to three conditions: b1 between the domains of positions there is an isomorphism with respect to their positional relation; b2 the state-classifiers are pairwise identical; b3 the courses of values of corresponding state-classifiers are equal.
- c) *Complex*: relation between a class of state-classifiers and a domain of positions, such that every state-classifier assigns a value to each position in the domain.
- d) *State-classifier*: descriptive function, ascribing a value to a certain position in a domain of positions (GRELLING & OPPENHEIM 1988a, p. 192-195).

An example from everyday life may illustrate the definition and its auxiliaries. Consider a house, build according to some plan. This plan is, through a change in scale of measurement, transposed into a full-blown house (the complex). The correspondence denotes the relation between the plan and the house. The state-classifier refers to the various materials (e.g., stone, iron, concrete) necessary to effect the change in scale of measurement. The plan of the house is its Gestalt, the invariant of

the transposition involved in the physical erection of the house (GRELLING & OPENHEIM, 1988b).

ANGYAL seems to defend an identical idea when he maintains that wholes are systems, unified according to one systems principle. Some wholes are perfectly arranged in accordance with the principle, while other wholes are just organized enough to recognize the principle. The law of „Prägnanz“ then would take a somewhat different form than in KOFFKA's definition, since the principle may either formally refer to „Prägnanz“ as originality (the primacy, autonomy or „Eigenständigkeit“ of a phenomenon, its capacity to serve as a prototype), or materially to „Prägnanz“ as meaningfulness (in accordance with the specific nature of the given structure, its types of mental set, habits and traditions in relation to a given environment, the „Sinn“ in the humanistic sense) (ANGYAL, 1941, pp. 243; BÜHLER, 1962, pp. 86; SMITH, 1988, p. 61-65).

Images and organizational Gestalt

The definition of Gestalt as „invariant of transpositions“ provides a fruitful basis for a reinterpretation and integration of a number of current images of organization (MORGAN, 1986). A useful starting point will be the discussion of the system concept, underlying many of these metaphors. Arguably, every Gestalt is a system, but not every system is a Gestalt. For a system to be a Gestalt, it is necessary, but not sufficient, for system parts to be interrelated. The structural variables of differentiation and integration describe the subdivision among parts and the quantity and quality of the connections between these parts. Second, these interrelations must be of a dynamic nature, involving energy and tensions not present in mere aggregates. Finally, the relations between parts must reflect the nature of the whole under consideration.

In their most general form these Gestalt requirements are met in the image of organization as an *organism*, i.e. as a living system more or less adapted to its surrounding environment, on which it depends for the gratification of various needs. The specific needs involved and the modes of adaptation to environmental contingencies vary from biological species to species and, metaphorically, from one organization to another. The organismic position in relation to Gestalt has probably been best expressed by GOLDSTEIN: „[The] good Gestalt...represents a very definite form of coming to terms of the organism with the world, that form in which the organism actualizes itself, according to its nature, in the best way“ (GOLDSTEIN, 1939, p.371). The nature of the organism is its invariant, transposed in a process of growth and development into maturity and determining its specific needs and modes of environmental adaptation. Metaphorically, a bicycle plant has a different history and a different nature and reacts differently to environmental contingencies than a consultancy firm (KATZ & KAHN, 1966; MORGAN, 1986, p. 39-76).

Further organismic considerations emerge from the image of organization as *brains*. In the metaphor of the „learning organization“ the adaptation to the environment is conceived of as a learning process. Similar to brain processes, the relations between parts in organizational wholes serve as channels of communication, processing information on environmental stimuli and (the effects of) actions, undertaken by the whole in response to these stimuli. Analogous to instances of brain injury, organizational learning is inhibited when information about external events is not processed, misinterpreted or inadequately channeled through the organizational system. In such cases an increasing maladaptation of the organization to environmental demands will occur, eventually leading to its demise. Organizational learning is enhanced, however, when communication channels are open, both inside the organization and to the outside world, and when the organization is able to respond quickly and adequately to environmental contingencies. Open communication and adequate responses are best achieved when organizational members may operate relatively free from predetermined inflexible rules and procedures, but at the same time with a firm grasp of the core values, mission and competences of their organization as a whole (ARGYRIS & SCHÖN, 1978; MORGAN, 1986, p.84-95; SENGE, 1990). In a metaphorical sense, these core values, mission and competences constitute the nature of the organizational whole, the invariant transposed through many individual actions into an adequate response of the whole to environmental demands.

The importance of the nature of the whole as a Gestalt requirement also appears in the image of organization as *flux & transformation*. Paradoxically, one of the most cogent metaphors here refers to what appears to be a non-learning, almost autistic organization, the autopoietic system. Defined as a network of productions of components which participate recursively in the same network which produced them and realize the network of productions as a unity, the autopoietic system is autonomous and organizationally closed. Not the open exchange with the environment is its prime goal, but the maintenance and reproduction of its own organization and identity. This metaphor lends credence to a view of organizations as self-producing systems, enacting their environments as projections of their own identity and defensively maintaining this identity against the external world (MORGAN, 1986, p.240-247; VAN TWIST & SCHAAP, 1991).

The question is how organizations, conceived as autopoietic systems, change and develop themselves. The principles of organizational closure and self-reproduction imply that such systems only evolve as a result of random variations within their boundaries. Recent insights from chaos theory suggest that these random changes may lead to new patterns of order and stability, through states of non-equilibrium that exert exponential transformational effects, once they have passed beyond certain critical mass levels. Autopoietic systems then appear to maintain their global (or meta-) stability over time by tolerating continuous, seemingly random, minor changes and fluctuations among their parts and subsystems (KICKERT, 1991; MORGAN, 1986, p.239-240).

The combination of apparent random change and inherent order is most persuasively demonstrated in computer simulations, in which near-endless iterations in a non-linear system are continuously fed back to themselves. In such deterministic chaos a certain shape gradually emerges from the chaotic reactions, creating boundary conditions (the so-called strange attractors). The best-known examples here are fractals, generated by relatively simple mathematical equations where the results are fed back into the equation until a certain boundary is crossed and iterations continue infinitely. When combined with visual technology, fractals have been shown to produce beautifully balanced shapes by endless iteration of the geometrical essence of the form involved (fern, spiral, etc.) (WHEATLEY, 1992, p. 75-99). The similarity of fractals to Gestalten, as defined in this paper, is both obvious and fascinating: the invariant as the (mathematical) essence, transposed in a near-endless series of non-linear iterations into a form that is good by any definition of „Prägnanz“.

As an image of organization, the transformation metaphor points at similar aspects as the brain metaphor. By patterning the core values, competences and mission into the behavior of the organization's members, the organization may largely dispense with rules, procedures, hierarchy and roles and allow itself to develop in a fractal, seemingly chaotic fashion. As organizational counterpart of the strange attractor one may consider the meaning („Sinn“) of the situation. By referring to core values and competences leaders create meaning into organizational change and development, just as employees instill „Sinn“ in their current working situation. The Gestalt of the organization conforms to shared meanings of the situation as interpreted by both managers and personnel of the organization (RUNDE, 1997; WHEATLEY, 1992, p.121-137).

Conclusions

In this paper various ramifications of a Gestalt theoretical analysis of organizations have been explored. On the basis of a distinction between subjective articulations (images, metaphors) and empirical Gestalten of organizations, a Gestalt image has been developed satisfying the EHRENFELS conditions. Defined (shorthandedly) as „invariant of transpositions“, the Gestalt concept proved able to incorporate the essence of three images of organization, the organism, brain and flux & transformation. With the Gestalt theoretical approach it was thus possible to achieve a fair amount of theoretical integration between various ways of analyzing organizations.

In organizations with a good Gestalt, core competences, values and mission are internalized to such a degree by members that they may perform relatively undisturbed by rules, procedures and regulations in order to achieve spontaneously those results that further the best interests of the organization. Communication channels are open internally and externally, permitting optimal organizational response to environmental contingencies.

This Gestalt image of organization contrasts rather sharply with several other metaphors. Images reflecting machine-like, bureaucratic modes of organization, inherent conflict of power and interests among organizational subunits or dominating, exploitative practices by organizations do not conform to the requirements that lend systems a Gestalt-quality (in fact, for some of them even the system quality is questionable). While all of these images may be characterized as „weak“ Gestalten, their diverse origins and nature would require a separate analysis, falling outside the scope of the present paper.

Finally, it is repeated that, as subjective articulations of organization, the images and metaphors have no necessary relation to the „empirical“ Gestalt of organizations, defined earlier as the sense of loyalty and identification individual members feel toward their organization. Used as tools of organizational diagnosis and (re-) design, the Gestalt image(s) discussed in this paper may serve to improve this empirical Gestalt, but this occurs only when the external view of the organization coincides with the internal image of that organization. With a little twist of the THOMAS theorem, one could say that only if organizational observers and participants come to share similar definitions of the situation, the consequences of that definition will become felt in organizational reality.

Summary

This paper contains a Gestalt theoretical analysis of organization as a macro-phenomenon. After distinguishing between subjective articulations (images, metaphors) and empirical Gestalten of organizations, a Gestalt image is developed on the basis of philosophical considerations. By capturing the essence of three existing images of organization, this Gestalt image achieves a fair deal of integration among various theoretical approaches to organizational analysis. On these grounds the Gestalt image may become a effective tool of organizational diagnosis and (re)design.

Zusammenfassung

Das Makrophänomen Organisation läßt sich im Sinne einer Gestalt analysieren. Der Unterschied subjektiver Bedeutungen und empirischer Gestalten von Organisationen wird dargelegt, um in der Folge ein Gestaltkonzept auf der Basis philosophischer Überlegungen zu entwickeln. Nachdem die Grundlagen drei verschiedener Bilder von Organisation skizziert wurden, liefert das Konzept der Gestalt eine Integrationsmöglichkeit der unterschiedlichen Ansätze, Organisationen zu analysieren.

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