

INTIMATE and STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS

Joseph Melnick and Stephanie Backman

Introduction

Enhancing the ability to form and maintain relationships is one of the primary goals of the Gestalt approach. Gestalt Therapy theory is grounded in the fundamental belief that change takes place at the boundary of the I and the other. Buber (1958), an influential voice in the development of Gestalt Therapy, was clear that there is no 'I' without an other (1).

Buber postulated two primary form of relationship, *I-Thou*, and *I-It*. Transparency and vulnerability characterize an 'I-Thou' relationship. The purpose is to connect and to be intimate. 'I-It' relationships are equally necessary for living. They are goal-oriented with an emphasis on action in order to meet the goal.

Historically, the Gestalt approach has emphasized the 'I-Thou' form of relating, valuing mutual self-disclosure, feedback and dialogue. Because the Gestalt approach focuses on increasing awareness, heightening contact and supporting dialogue, it is ideally suited for the development of intimacy.

However, life is not just about connection. It is also about work and completing tasks (2). Because Gestalt Therapy was originally applied primarily to individuals, the world of work and of organizations, until recently, has been less emphasized in many Gestalt circles. This, however, is rapidly changing as Gestaltists stretch our approach to deal with the greater collective beyond that of the individual system, and more specifically the world of work and organizations (3).

Our purpose is to explore the continuum of relationship from 'I-Thou' to 'I-It'. Rather than using Buber's terms we would prefer to build upon our previous work and use the terms *intimate* and *strategic* (4). We use the word 'intimate' to refer to 'I-Thou' situations and 'strategic' and to refer to Buber's 'I-It'. Prior to presenting our primary thesis, we would like to define these two important concepts 'intimacy' and 'strategy', along with two others, *power* and *hierarchy*.

Intimacy

'Intimacy' involves interactions between two (or more) individuals that contribute to the personal knowing of each. 'Intimacy' requires an openness and willingness to be seen and experienced and to see and experience the other(s). It occurs through authentic verbal and behavioural expression of feelings and thoughts, thus allowing each to feel present and increasingly connected to the other.

Strategy

'Strategy' is a way of interacting with another or others that is planned and future-oriented, taking into consideration a variety of factors such as personality traits, power differential, status, environmental context, reasonable expectations, politics and the nature of

already existing relationships, in order to influence or ensure the achievement of an identified goal. It is action oriented and pragmatic.

Power

By 'power' we mean influence. In a relationship that is more intimacy-based, we believe that influence is best if it is fluid, equitable, contextual and utilized for the thickening and development of relationship. Typically in a strategic relationship 'power' tends to be more fixed and more a function of position than context.

Hierarchy

'Hierarchy' exists in all relationships (Wilber 1996). It can be based on many factors such as competence, knowledge, emotional or physical strength, biology, gender, etc.—and, of course, formal position. In all relationships, fixed 'hierarchy' at its best creates safety, diminishes chaos and anxiety, thus leading to clarity and efficiency in decision-making and attainment of goals. On the other hand, it can diminish options and creativity. In fact, fixed hierarchies tend to diminish the possibilities for, and the continual development of 'intimacy'.

Purpose

Our thesis is two-fold. The first part is more obvious. To function effectively in relationship, skills (or what we term 'ground conditions') are necessary. As the system, be it 'intimate' or 'strategic', increases its proficiency in these skills, the capacity for connection or goal attainment increases. A working list for 'intimate' and 'strategic' ground conditions is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Conditions for Intimacy

Knowing when to speak and when not to speak. This involves not only having a developed sense of others, but also of context and timing.

An ability to bear and manage disappointment and to bear and manage disappointing. This involves the ability to say "no" to someone you care about. To accept saying and hearing "no."

An ability and commitment to reducing projection. A willingness to move from "You didn't do what you said," to "I'm annoyed with you and I don't know what to do with it." This skill involves a curiosity about my contribution to the mess, rather than putting all of my energy on your side.

A commitment not to blame self or others.

An ability to maintain interest in the other. This involves the capacity for continuous mutual curiosity; the ability to be aware of what the other is interested in.

Humour! Relationships are so serious there needs to be an escape valve, a softening of patterns, a shift in feeling states.

Mutual generosity. To give without a precondition and to do in the moment what the other wants and needs. To be generous by giving undivided attention and interest to the other when needed.

A willingness to give individual attention.

The ability to protect both individual and couple boundaries.

The ability to influence and to be influenced.

The ability to be spontaneous and relate in the here and now.

Spiritual support. Ability to respond to the unknown.

Courage to break old templates. Willingness to experiment. A very simple example: changing the customary pace of the dialogue, slowing it down.

Loving appreciation. An ability and willingness to move towards the other and stay there through the hard moments.

Mutual vulnerability; an ability to be transparent.

Lack of a fixed hierarchy.

Capacity to manage conflict, to speak it, develop it and resolve it.

Ability to self-regulate and manage energy.

Ability to keep dialogue alive.

Capacity to feel compassion.

Our second thesis is less obvious than the first. It is that a 'contextually correct' or ideal blend of 'intimacy' and 'strategy' is necessary for all relationship to function optimally (5). Furthermore, when there are problems in an 'intimate' relationship 'strategic' skills may be over- or under-utilized. Similarly, when there are repetitive problems in a 'strategic' relationship, intimacy skills may be too much or too little used. We would like to give examples of each.

Table 2: Conditions for Strategy

- Selective sharing in the interest of a desirable outcome.
- Ability to mobilize against disappointing outcomes.
- Emphasis on economy of time and/or energy.
- Take advantage of power differential.
- Hold on to goal without being deflected by feelings.
- Saying something that people might not like; being abrupt or intrusive.
- Acting to influence a process without engaging in it in a fully honest way.
- A willingness to use coercion when necessary.
- A willingness to make a hard decision.
- A willingness to be authoritative.
- A willingness to contain information that can not be shared.
- An ability to hold a position in the face of other's negative feelings.
- A willingness to keep to a time frame.
- A willingness to be thoughtful and deliberate vs. spontaneous.
- An ability to focus on the future vs. the here and now.
- A willingness to stay action oriented and omit sharing awareness.
- A willingness to bear the loss of intimacy.
- Intimate Systems

Mary and John—Too much strategy

Mary, an organizational consultant, came into psychotherapy after being left without warning by her banker husband John, of 20 years. She came home one night and found a note saying that he was leaving and would be in contact later. He never did contact her (nor she him). She was hurt as well as puzzled and angry, especially after finding out that he had moved from their expensive house into a trailer with his former secretary. Mary, reminiscing, described a marriage consisting of separate checking accounts, a house that ran like clockwork and tasks mutually assigned and completed on time. Now, divorced for three years,

they still talked about what they described with pride as their "marriage of the 60s" based on a lack of 'hierarchy', total mutuality, a consensual approach to problem solving and "above all, full honesty" at all times. Thus, questions such as: "Am I looking fat?" or: "How much do you love me?" were answered in an honest way without considering the long-term impact on the other.

A further organizing belief is that 'hierarchy', no matter how minimal, is inauthentic, and that every decision no matter how small or large must be consensual. Because everyone (including their two teenage sons) has an equal vote and because everyone has to be happy with each decision, deciding what movie to see or what restaurant to eat in often involves endless dialogue. A result of this living out of this fixed gestalt-the static belief in the continuous mutuality of 'power'-has resulted in an inefficient, painful and unsatisfying relationship.

Strategic

Vietnam—Too little intimacy

After the Vietnam War, veterans' hospitals were inundated with veterans addicted to drugs and suffering from extreme forms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Although the reasons for this increase in trauma, when compared to other wars, will always be open to conjecture, a reasonable hypothesis is that it was a result of too little 'intimacy'. More specifically, soldiers were flown in and out of units at such a quick pace that a sense of team and community was never developed. Furthermore, in previous wars, the soldiers spent weeks with each other returning to the United States via transport ships. This provided an ongoing opportunity for them to talk to each other about their experiences, to reminisce, to mourn and to transition back into a civilian life. Instead, in the war in Vietnam the soldiers were at war one day and flown back to the US the day after. In retrospect, a better strategy would have been to increase the opportunity for intimacy by building cohesive teams and increasing the transition time and opportunities for dialogue.

Corporate—Too much intimacy

One last example, that of contextually too much intimacy in a work environment, took place in a large corporation. At an annual retreat, after a few drinks and a light flirtation, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), a man, appeared at the hotel room of the Chief Financial Officer (CFO), a woman. She felt confused, but invited him in. Although, there was no physical contact, the verbalization of their mutual physical attraction left them both vulnerable resulting in years of struggle. It eventually resulted in the CFO leaving the organization; resigning from an organization she cared deeply for. The price paid was not just personal, but was also on an organizational level.

Experiment

In order to make these concepts more *experience-near*, we would like to suggest a series of exercises.

I. First, think of an intimate relationship that you are currently in. Now, viewing the list of 'intimacy' skills (see Table 1) rate the relationship on how well the two of you do with each. Now, do the same thing with a 'strategic' relationship. Pick one relationship and evaluate it using Table 2.

II. Pick an 'intimate' relationship that has been, or is currently problematic for you. Now, using the list of strategic skills, pick one that would help resolve the difficulties.

Now, pick a strategic relationship that is or has been problematic for you. Drawing from the list of 'intimacy' skills, select one that would help to diminish these difficulties.

Optimism

The focus of this paper, and especially the examples given, have focused on relationships in which skills are lacking or when the blend of 'intimacy' and 'strategy' has been problematic. Before closing we would like to present two examples of relationships in which 'intimacy' and strategy were combined in such a way that success was maximized.

Strategy

This example involves a recent article (September 17, 2000) that appeared in the *New York Times*. It involves a 'strategic' environment (American Professional Football) where the fundamental goal is winning the game. It described a team that, after a losing season the previous year, were undefeated after three games.

In order to increase the calibre of their play, they decided that individuals needed to focus more on the team. To increase their bond, they decided that anyone who spoke to the media about individual accomplishments would be fined anywhere from two dollars to fifty dollars. Obviously, the amount of the fine was not significant; the strategy was to get the players to talk 'about being one unit.' That goal enhanced their skilful work on the football field.

Intimacy

Rob has a passion for sailing. He practices three times a week with his crew and races his sailboat on Sunday. His wife, Mary, wanted to join him, showing interest in a sport that mattered to him. Rob was resistant because he had seen many couples fighting endlessly as they sailed together. He told her that he "can hear them fighting all over the lake."

Mary offered to "formalize" the 'hierarchy'; that is, every time they would be in the boat, Rob would be captain every minute. Rob, after much hesitation, agreed to this experiment. He used his authority/leadership and Mary stayed within the limits of 'first mate'. They were able to negotiate an effective contract founded on a shared awareness. They sailed together in races and on holidays together for eight enjoyable years.

Conclusion

In this article we have broken down relationship into two types, 'intimate' where connecting is the goal, and 'strategic' where a tangible product is desired. In fact, all relationships are a blend of 'intimacy' and 'strategy'. Each form of relating needs a basic set of skills or ground conditions to function effectively. When there is redundancy and a lack of development in either form, it is our belief that the blend of 'intimacy' and 'strategy' is sub-potential given the relational context. Finally, by developing the skills, and by analyzing and calibrating the correct blend, one can minimize difficulties and enhance the relationship, be it primarily intimate or strategic in nature.

Endnotes

1. We would like to thank Sonia Nevis and Edwin Nevis for their significant contributions to the conceptualizations expressed in this paper.

2. Buber, a teacher of Laura Perls, has influenced the Gestalt approach in many ways. Most important is the Gestalt emphasis on dialogue that Resnick (1995) identifies as one of the three pillars of the Gestalt method.
3. Certainly Goodman, among the founders of the Gestalt approach was very interested in the world of work (personal communication from Edwin Nevis 1999).
4. Two examples of highly successful training programs that apply Gestalt principles to work are the Organization and System Development (OSD) program of Gestalt Institute of Cleveland and the Organizational Program of Gestalt Academy (Scandinavia).
5. For example, please see Wheeler and Backman (1994) and Melnick and Nevis (1994 and 1999).
6. Table 1 is adapted from Nevis and Melnick (2000). These tables are different in form, reflecting the differences in intimate and strategic relationships described previously. The 'Conditions for Intimacy' table represents a balance of awareness, hierarchy, and power, whereas the Conditions for Strategy table reflects a system in which awareness, hierarchy, and power reside primarily in one individual.
7. Hollowell (1999) offers an excellent discussion of the need for the balance between 'intimacy' and 'strategy' in organizations, because Gestalt Therapy was originally applied primarily to individuals, not the world of work and of organizations.

References

- Buber, M. (1958): *I and Thou*. (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons).
- Freeman, M. (2000): "For These Linemen, Teammates Come First or the Wallet Comes Out." *New York Times*, p.40, Sunday, September 17.
- Hycner, R. and Jacobs, L. (1995): *The Healing Relationship in Gestalt Therapy: A Dialogic/Self Psychology Approach*. (Highland, NY, The Gestalt Journal Press, Inc).
- Hollowell, E. (1999): "The Human Moment at Work." *Harvard Business Review*, pp.58-66, January-February.
- Melnick, J. and Nevis, S. (2000): "Being with Another: The Development and Maintenance of Intimacy." Submitted for publication.
- Melnick, J. and Nevis, S. (1999): "Gestalt Family Therapy." *British Gestalt Journal*, 1; pp.321-4.
- Melnick, J. and Nevis, S. (1994): "Intimacy and Power in Long-term Relationships: A Gestalt Therapy/Systems Perspective." G. Wheeler and S. Backman, (Eds.), *On Intimate Ground: A Gestalt Approach to Working with Couples*. (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass).
- Resnick, R. (1995): "Gestalt Therapy: Principles, Prisms and Perspectives." *British Gestalt Journal*, 4, 1; pp.3-13.
- Wheeler, G. and Backman, S., Eds. (1994): *On Intimate Ground: A Gestalt Approach to Working with Couples*. (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass).
- Wilber, K. (1996): *A Brief History of Everything*. (Boston, Shambhala).