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Fields of power: the moderation of relational moments¹

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Abstract

This article addresses the concept of power in Gestalt therapy. It builds particularly on the work of two field theorists: Kurt Lewin and Pierre Bourdieu, and proposes a view of power as moderating the field and impacting the relational moment. Moving beyond the notion of power as visible coercion, the article explores the more implicit power that lies in our everyday privilege and our ground. It outlines two key moderations of power that play out at both the individual and systemic levels. Highlighting contextual power in such a way also leads to a re-evaluation of Gestalt's change theory as being driven by contextual supports as well as organismic needs. Finally, the article concludes with reflections on the implications for practice.

Keywords

power, field theory, relational, theory of change, privilege, Kurt Lewin, Pierre Bourdieu, Habitus

The field of power is a field of latent, potential forces,
which play upon any particle which may venture into it,
but it is also a battlefield

(Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 149-150)

Can we speak of fields of power in Gestalt? In an epistemology so focused on the here-and-now moment, can power be conceived of in a form that transcends its visible immediacy? Can it be understood as a latent aspect of the field which lends more weight to certain figures than others?

The notion of power in Gestalt is mostly unexplored in the sense that it doesn't slot into our theory base in a way that we can understand or make sense of. It therefore leaves us (as Gestalt practitioners), vulnerable to the whims of power and its undercurrents, as they present unexpected and mostly unwanted in our clinical and organisational practices. Attempting to articulate or conceptualise a process or idea is one route to awareness. Power today is writ large in politics, societal battles as well as very real wars for control, for power over land and ideas. And so, more than ever, awareness of power in ourselves, in others, in our

communities and societies feels essential to an ethical presence.

In this paper I begin with curiosity; with a wondering at how the notion of power has been put forward in our Gestalt theory so far. I then propose that power in all its forms is both relational and contextual. The relational component is more familiar and immediately noticeable to us whilst the contextual component often lies in ground, mysterious and inconspicuous in layers of culture, history and context. It is this less obvious aspect of power which this article aims to address. An aspect which Lukes (2021) and Hauggaard (2020) call the third dimension of power and which lies beyond the interpersonal or agenda-setting aspects of power.

When looking at context, we naturally in Gestalt turn to Field Theory. This article therefore explores how power links to our understanding of Field Theory in Gestalt through the work of Kurt Lewin (1951) of course, but also through the contribution of Pierre Bourdieu (a French field theorist) who has, in particular, written extensively about power and culture (Bourdieu 1987, 1993). In doing so, Field Theory is re-considered and expanded through the work of Bourdieu.

The paper will then outline two key ways in which power moderates the relational moment both at the personal and systemic levels. It will then conclude with some implications for our practice as clinicians and organisational practitioners.

Power just is!

Power takes many forms and definitions. A large array of philosophers and writers, such as Aristotle (1941), Weber (1978), Arendt (1970, 1998) and Searle (1996), to name a few, have tried to capture the essence of power and have primarily described power in two essentially contrasting ways: power as domination (also called *power over*) or, in terms of power as empowerment (or *power to*) (Allen, 1999). Lukes, however, argues that power is ‘an essentially contested concept’ (2021), in the sense that there is no singular correct definition of power. He goes further and writes that there is a negative normative evaluation of the word power (*ibid*); in other words, people will view power as negatively impacting themselves or others.

Although mostly perceived as only negative, power is neither good nor bad in absolute terms, it just is! Of course, it can be violent, coercive and even toxic but it is important to recognise that power can also be expansive to both parties involved in an exchange. Some power constraints, for instance, that we apply as therapists in our practice, are not unfriendly to our clients but can be safe and holding. Setting a firm boundary to our therapeutic session is such an example, or asking for an end to sessions rather than an abrupt stop to the work is another example of supportive power. In French, the word for power is ‘*pouvoir*’ which also translates as ‘to be able to’ and so, power is also an enabler, a way of impacting and influencing the world around us rather than only used in an authoritarian or violent way over another. Another example of such legitimate power-over is the power of a supervisor to strongly direct a practitioner towards a certain action to ensure the safeguarding of vulnerable clients. In such a case, power-over also leads to more power-to.

Hannah Arendt, the political philosopher and Holocaust survivor writes that ‘violence appears when power is in jeopardy’ (1970, p. 56) by which, I believe, she means that the exercise of power and influence more often happens with no visible violence at all, and that physical violence is usually a sign of a loss of power (in political and social arenas). And so, power often is invisible, in ground or at least not always discernible or in conscious awareness. We might at times be completely oblivious to it (as in the case of the power of data analytics to

influence our behaviour), and habitually this power is only evident or noticeable through feelings of powerlessness, shame and disconnect which it leaves in its wake. It is more of this type of invisible, in ground, and less obvious power that this article aims to address. When power takes this more imperceptible, stealth-like form, how can we better attune to its impact and call it out in our work and practice?

Power in Gestalt

Alongside enchantment (Polster, 2021), Gestalt practice is also an invitation to discover the individual’s creative power and re-own disowned parts (Perls et al., 1951/1994, p. 13). Indeed, they write that ‘If a man identifies with his forming self, does not inhibit his own creative excitement ... then he is psychologically healthy, for he is exercising his best power and will do the best he can in the difficult circumstances of the world’ (*ibid*, p. 11).

In its focus on the moment-by-moment unfolding of experience, Gestalt is a practice which invites us into a dance to follow our self-regulating impulse and trust in organismic health. Because ‘self-regulating action is brighter, stronger and shrewder [and] any other line of action ... must proceed with diminished power, less motivation, and more confused awareness’ (Perls et al., 1951/1994, p. 52). This reification of, and trust in, the self-regulating instinct is what often is seen as powerful in Gestalt. It is recognised as the ability to show up fully with all our creativity, and not hold back or disown any aspect of our experience. To be fully in the moment is the way to get our needs met. And of course, this applies to the client but also the practitioner who is also invited to follow the ‘dominance’ of their spontaneous ‘judgements of what is important’ (*ibid*). They further ask, ‘What is the reality of an interview in which one of the partners, the therapist, inhibits his best power, what he knows and thereby evaluates?’ (Perls et al., 1951/1994, p. 63).

And so facilitating individual power is something our forbearers in Gestalt did well. They emphasised personal power and charismatic presence as can be seen in the early ‘Gloria videos’ (Shostrom, 1965) which reveal Fritz Perls, the showman, challenging and even aggressive at times. They showed an older, more expert man confronting a younger woman. Today we may cringe watching these exchanges, and of course, Perls was a product of his time and culture. It is interesting, however, that comparatively little has been written about power in Gestalt since then.

Power as a relational and contextual process

Thankfully, Gestalt theory has moved on since Perls' time, and contemporary Gestalt is acknowledged as a relational practice (Jacobs, 1989/1995; Yontef, 2002; Lee, 2004; Jacobs & Hycner, 2009) where all behaviour is recognised as situated. Our theory base tells us that being powerful (or powerless) is always a function of the field, and so any behaviour or feeling emerges from a given context and a set of relationships in the moment.

A way of capturing the relational and contextual dimensions of power can be best viewed through the Relational Change SOS (Self-Other-Situation) framework (Denham-Vaughan & Chidiac, 2013) depicted in Figure 1. It highlights the notion that power isn't just an attribute of the individual *self* alone, but happens in relationship with *other* and in the moment of a given *situation*. We can probably all recall instances of feeling powerful and how that feeling might have been a function of all those three lenses. It might, for example, have been linked to our sense of confidence following a good night's sleep, or to a specific relationship with another which was supportive, or indeed to the particular situation we were in, such as presenting or teaching, which may be comfortable or familiar to us. But is an awareness of these three lenses always enough to avoid the charismatic over-extension which was part of Gestalt history? Building on previous writing, the question of an ethical stance and presence (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2020) in our relational Gestalt praxis poses itself again: how to recognise when my feeling powerful, potent and present as a Gestalt practitioner is experienced as coercive by the other?

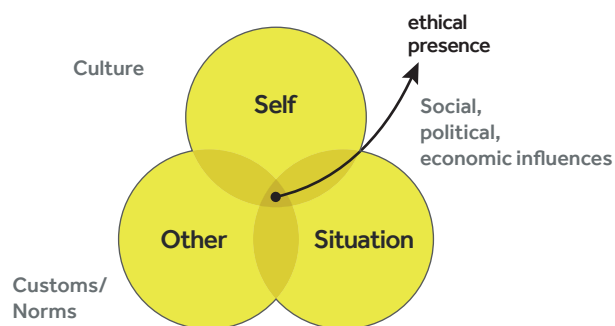


Figure 1- The SOS Framework

The SOS lenses emphasise the relational nature of power which emerges from the interlinking of the three lenses. As therapists or coaches, we would naturally explore these dimensions when, for instance, our

client presents with feeling powerless. We might, for instance, focus on how their own personal experience of powerlessness is being retriggered in the moment (*self* lens) or, on how much support they seek or have through others (*other*). This is because, as Gestalt practitioners, we know that being in connection with others is the most healing aspect of shame and disconnect. Or we may also wonder, what it is about this particular *situation* that invited powerlessness?

But is exploring the sense of self, relationship with other and immediate situation always enough to fully understand the power dynamics being enacted? I would suggest not, as power is also *contextual* in the sense that (as shown in Figure 1) it lies within culture, norms and customs as well as a multitude of social, political and economic influences. It is important here to differentiate between the present here-and-now immediate situation and the wider context. Both, of course, are part of our phenomenal field and yet, they are differentiated in their specific focus in the time/space continuum. The situation could be understood as our present moment awareness of a possible event site (Badiou, 2005). Daniel Stern (2004) defines the 'present moment' as a lived story that has not just a beginning and an end, but also a plot, intentional characters and a 'temporal contour along which the experience forms' (p. 219). This forming is constantly moulded by the wider context as a ground for the unfolding experience of self-other, other-situation and self-situation. The here-and-now is a rapidly shifting fractal containing the trace of the whole. Gestalt however, as Polster (2021) writes, has reified the attention to the here-and-now experience (ibid, p. 45) and this, often even to the detriment of the ground from which this immediate experience arises.

As therapists, coaches and supervisors, we may, in the moment, feel supremely confident, at ease and comfortable in a here-and-now situation. We may even be in good working alliance with the other person(s) in the room. The present-moment situation is supportive and containing. Yet when sitting with a particular client or chewing over a specific topic with a supervisee, dimensions of power and privilege may become figural and interrupt the relational moment. Let me illustrate this through a small vignette:

I used to supervise a practitioner I was very fond of. She would travel to me from her small town in the North of England as she couldn't find a supervisor she wanted to work with closer to home. She would stay in London

with a friend overnight and take the train down to meet me the next morning. After a few months, she brought up her annoyance, feeling she didn't have the time to even visit the toilet when she arrived to me without it eating into the allocated time we had together. She was feeling resentful of this, as well as not valued and less important in our relationship. My initial response was to feel defensive, 'Why would she be different to any other supervisee?' And why should I extend the time we had contracted for, especially on days which for me happened to be very full?

The layer of self-protective arguments gradually dissipated as we started exploring what was happening for us both. Realising that what we both had initially missed was the wider field of privilege in which we sat. We missed that she felt she needed to travel to London to have supervision that wasn't so available to her where she lived. That London and the 'South' was where people with more privilege would have access to more supervisors and more choice.

In this example, a focus on self, connection with others and the immediate situation was not enough to understand or uncover power dynamics. Power in this case inhabited structures of ground, historical and social layers and ingrained ways of being. It lingered in the 'normality' of the way we are in our customs and culture. The disturbance is only sensed through our bodies and emotions, through feelings of shame, withdrawal and powerlessness; emotions that are often left unspoken or falsely attributed to some personal failing. In this example, the fields of power that my supervisee and I were embedded in, had moderated the relational moment and interrupted the self-other-situation dynamics between us. Moderations to contact are familiar concepts in Gestalt and imply (usually) unaware interruptions to the contact cycle. Similarly, I would like to suggest that contextual power moderates the cycle of contact but that these interruptions are not arising from habitual patterns in self or other, but in patterns within the wider context and field we are immersed in.

As depicted in the above vignette, most often this contextual power is not in conscious awareness. It is not explicit, or even particularly noticed as it is often part of what is habitual or normalised. This type of power which is omnipresent and largely invisible is similar to the way the French philosopher Michel Foucault describes power (Foucault & Faubion, 2000). Naming it a moderator of the relational moment

begs the question, however, of how it moderates and interrupts the moment. Before outlining two key ways in which fields of power moderate the relational moment, I would like first to build on the understanding of power in the work of two field theorists: Kurt Lewin and Pierre Bourdieu.

A field of forces: Kurt Lewin

The main explanation of what shapes behaviour in Gestalt comes to us through the work of Kurt Lewin (1936, 1948, 1951). His famous formula, *Behaviour = f (Person, Environment)*, seems to neatly divide the world up into individual and environment, but we know from his writing on the social space (Lewin, 1948; Friedman, 2011), as well as the incorporation of his work into Gestalt theory (Parlett 1991, 1997), that there are no such distinct 'things' as individual and environment. Lewin's formula and work on field theory invite us to consider that what shapes behaviour is a multitude of forces both stemming from our intra-personal needs as well as the impact on our psychological environment (Staemmler, 2006) of the variety of life spaces (specific situations and contexts we are or have been in). Although he doesn't name it as a particular aspect of power, Lewin's force field analysis (Lewin, 1951) presupposes constant influences and power being enacted on a person's psychological life-space, or what he calls field. In other words, we all are constantly subjected to forces in our phenomenal field which shape our moment-to-moment behaviour.

In particular, Lewin recognised the psychological boundaries of the life space of an individual or group. Indeed an important feature of this life space is what Lewin called the 'space of free movement', a notion not often quoted in our Gestalt literature and which he defines as the 'totality of regions to which the person in question has access from his present position' (1936, p. 100). And this space of free movement for an individual or a group is determined by ability, what is allowed and other factors such as social position and the character of social relationships (ibid, 1936, pp. 44-45, 96).

What is interesting in this definition is that Lewin articulates the limitations to behaviour, or the constraining forces on the individual, as determined by the boundaries set to the life space. What he draws our attention to is that which might limit or constrain us in our freedom, in our movement, in our power, has to do with *ability, relationships and social positioning*. All aspects which we could link to the three lenses of SOS framework, as shown in Figure 2. We could also

ponder on what Lewin means in his definition of ‘what is allowed’. I believe that he was referring here to the contextual ground in the sense of what is allowed by the culture and norms within the field.

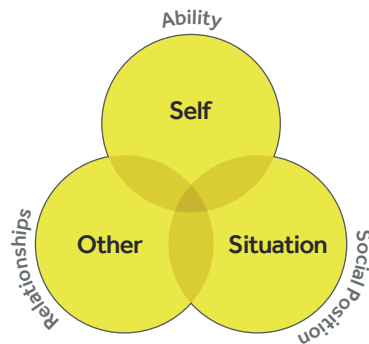


Figure 2

Organismic need vs power of context

It is indeed challenging to consider that what limits our power and movement are those aspects of our self, relationships, social positioning and context. Challenging because traditionally our Gestalt theory tells us that movement or mobilisation is mostly dependent on the intensity or brightness of the figure emerging into awareness. Indeed, Gestalt holds that the strength of the figure will carry the energy and allow movement around the cycle of experience. This is a key part of the Cycle of Experience (Zinker, 1977) as we go from sensation of need, to awareness, mobilisation and so on in an uninterrupted flow around the cycle. This primacy of ‘needs’ stems from the writing of Perls who granted organismic need a major role in the formation of figures. Taking, for instance, his famous example (1969b) of a man walking through the desert and being thirsty, he writes that what stands out for the man above all is what will quench his need or thirst. ‘Suddenly in this undifferentiated general world something emerges as a Gestalt, as a foreground, namely, let’s say, a well with water’ (ibid, 1969b, p. 14).

Traditionally, Gestalt focuses on need satisfaction, with moderation to contact stemming from the individual’s personal limitations. What is less attended to, however, is how the thirsty man’s freedom of movement is limited by other aspects of ability, relationship, positioning and context. In considering the thirsty man, we could ask: is the water in the well difficult to access, can he climb down the well to get it? Is he nimble and strong enough? Is he able-bodied enough? (an aspect of the individual’s ability). Or we could wonder if there is a friendly person he can ask help from (his relationships

and network), or even whether the culture of the land is such that he will be perceived as deserving of the water. Is he from a tribe in the desert allowed access to that particular well? (an aspect of social positioning and context).

Being powerful through ability, connection and status or position are therefore also important enablers to having our needs met. This highlights a needed re-evaluation of Gestalt’s change theory. Paraphrasing Beisser (1972), change occurs because of a re-configuration of the field and it is the alteration in available supports that often allows for a different resolution of the need and figure of interest. And so, as well as being driven by organismic need, figure formation and movement are also enabled by our sense of feeling and being powerful in those ways.

And so we may ask ourselves which abilities, what connections and what type of positioning provide us power?

Every field is a field of struggle:

Pierre Bourdieu

This question can best be answered through the work of another field theorist, Pierre Bourdieu. Like Lewin, Bourdieu was also influenced by the work of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 228; Lewin, 1948), a twentieth-century German philosopher most well-known for his work on culture and symbolism (Cassirer, 1944).

Although Bourdieu did not use the term ‘life space,’ he described a field in ways that are similar to Lewin. Rather than a phenomenal first-person perspective, Bourdieu views fields also as social spaces. In an interview discussing the intellectual field, Bourdieu stated:

When I talk of intellectual field, I know very well that in this field I will find ‘particles’ (let me pretend for a moment that we are dealing with a physical field) that are under the sway of forces of attraction, of repulsion, and so on, as in a magnetic field. Having said this, as soon as I speak of a field, my attention fastens on the primacy of this system of objective relations over the particles themselves. And we could say, following the formula of a famous German physicist, that the individual, like the electron, is an *Ausgeburts des Felds*: he or she is in a sense an emanation of the field.

(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 106).

In that same interview, he also insists that those ‘particles’ are not just subjected to the field but are themselves ‘potential and active forces’ and therefore the field is also ‘a field of struggle’ aimed at preserving or transforming the configuration of these forces’ (ibid, p. 101).

Understanding the field as including power struggles is illuminating. It recognises that in each social space, field forces act to preserve the continuity of the status quo whilst, simultaneously, acknowledging that individuals in that social space have a fundamental need for a certain ‘freedom of movement’ which motivates change.

Bourdieu (1986, 1987, 1990, 1993) introduced many concepts to explain power struggles in the field. I will next outline two of his key concepts which I believe usefully add to the Gestalt view of field: the notions of *Habitus* and *Capital*.

Habitus is the logic that governs a particular field. Habitus refers to the behaviours, dispositions and habits that a person embodies as their internalised norm (Bourdieu, 1990). Akin to the personality function of the self in Gestalt (Perls et al., 1951/1994), the habitus is so internalised over time as to become nature. Therefore habitus is both an epistemological and ontological phenomenon. It is the way we understand or conceive of the world but also our way of being in the world. Within each field that a person occupies, their internalised habitus subconsciously guides their behaviours and interactions as to what is appropriate and normal for each given field. Habitus therefore also holds a dominant discourse about what is acceptable and valued in a given field. Indeed, Bourdieu (1977) describes discourse as a ‘structured structuring structure’ (Bourdieu, 1977: cited Swartz, 1998) through which social actors use language to construct a social reality harmonious with the shared social, historical, and cultural structures that embody the habitus.

Whilst habitus is the way we conceive, shape and get shaped by the world we inhabit, the second concept of ‘capital’ relates more to what Lewin referred to in terms of the abilities and relationships that each person may have in a particular field. In his concept of ‘capital’, Bourdieu extends beyond the notion of material or economic assets to capital that may be social (social relationships and networks), or cultural (knowledge, education, artefacts) (Bourdieu, 1986).

For Bourdieu, power is signalled through these forms of capital as a way of influencing what is happening

in the moment. And social position in the field is determined by the type and volume of capital a person possesses and the value and distribution of these forms of capital (whether economic, cultural, social etc.) establishes a kind of unequal order between actors within a field. However, he argues that in addition to accumulating forms of capital, actors deploy strategies to improve their position in the field. The formation and meaning of these ‘position-takings’ are fundamentally relational (Bourdieu, 1992/1996, p. 233) in that each position derives its meaning, value and effects from its relation to other position-takings in the field. And so, positioning in a given situation configures the situation into an ‘us vs them’. Although Bourdieu didn’t expand on aspects of belonging beyond the social class system, it seems logical in today’s world to also recognise that signalling through position-taking is also about belonging and identity.

Overlapping these types of capital onto the SOS model (see Figure 3), we can see how personal capital, social capital as well as position-takings can signal power. An example of this arose when researching this lecture and speaking to the CEO of a public sector organisation who also happened to be a black woman. She reflected that individuals who wanted to influence her decision would tend to do so in three main ways. They would either attempt to demonstrate their competence and expertise (personal capital), or call upon the intimacy of their connection to her or other influential people (social capital) or, they might also attempt to name a commonality in their positioning and belonging; such as both belonging to the black community or to a certain professional group (position-taking/belonging).

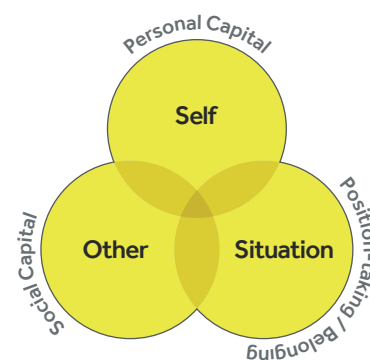


Figure 3

So, what Bourdieu tells us is that in every field, what gets emphasised in service of gaining power or influence are aspects that are valued, recognised and appreciated in that particular field. Emphasising, for example, my knowledge of Gestalt with my teenage children holds little power, and I would likely gain more

influence by noting my appreciation of some trendy singing artist. Similarly, as many of us have shifted in varying degrees to online working in this post-pandemic era, we might reflect on what is emphasised (in awareness or not) through our online background. Be it a virtual background, books, plants or a carefully constructed would-be ‘neutral’ image, what might it be signalling in terms of power and positioning?

The power signalling which re-enforces dominant views or discourses is often done unconsciously. This is because the habitus itself is the familiar status quo of the field we inhabit. Bourdieu writes that encountering a world which matches your own habitus is like ‘being a fish in water, it does not feel the weight of water and takes the world about itself for granted’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Becoming aware of a habitus which is different from our own (when for instance, we visit a new country or enter a new organisation), we are more conscious of what is valued (or not) in that field and will naturally try in various ways to gain power and achieve greater freedom of movement. Ghassan Hage (2021), a Lebanese-Australian Professor of Anthropology at the University of Melbourne wrote in researching Lebanese immigrants in Australia that those who were Christians would make a point of wearing a cross on a necklace around their necks to signal their Christian faith and thus their belonging to the dominant group of the country (ibid). It is also important to recognise we are in the midst of an important worldwide struggle over ecological and climate change-related issues, and that ‘environmental capital’ is still seriously undervalued in most habitus.

Two key moderations of the Relational Moment

Figural happenings are always contained within a background of total life experience, and they derive meaningfulness through the reverberations between them and the context of a total existence.

(Polster, 2021, p. 35)

So how can we be attentive to these fields of power and to the power signalling that can be so invisible, so ingrained that they become the normal way of being in the world? And mostly how can we catch ourselves in those moments and become aware of how power has interrupted the relational moment? With this in mind, I

would like to propose two key moderations which I refer to as Unrecognised Privilege and Unrecognised Ground.

Unrecognised Privilege: the misrecognition of personal capital

This power moderation happens when personal capital suddenly becomes figural as privileged or valued in the moment within the field.

This is a familiar occurrence for most people, and an example of this unrecognised privilege is being an English speaker at an international conference where the language is English. Having this privilege of language, this personal capital in this situation, provides the individual with a certain power. It is however normative power where there is no oppressor or oppressed, it is just the way the world is. Another example of this unrecognised privilege is being able-bodied; a state of privilege and power in many situations as the world provides obstacles to various kinds of disabilities. Bourdieu, in his book *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1987) writes about ‘having taste’ as a personal capital that is taken for granted, assuming that everyone can recognise good taste. It is seen as a taken-for-granted aspect of personal capital not acknowledging the privilege of education, exposure and economic possibilities that enable the development of taste.

Most of the time, this power imbalance isn’t even in our awareness because, as human beings, we are often blind to the inconsistency of privilege when it comes to ourselves. We want to disown our privileges and instead, we often get preoccupied with our disadvantages. It is a phenomenon that Malin Fors calls ‘privilege blackout’ (Fors, 2018).

We can all probably agree, for example, that the therapeutic or coaching context favours recognising the skill (and power) of the practitioner. This can lead some clients to feel subordinated or powerless in this context and so attempt to defend against this power differential through a variety of ways. They might, for instance, dismiss the therapist’s input, or find means of highlighting their own ability (by talking about their experience or job expertise). Or even, by making more light-hearted jokes, as one of my clients asked as we walked up my garden towards my office, ‘So, who exactly is leading who down the garden path?’ Bourdieu’s thinking encourages us in these situations, to name and recognise the power differential, and

confirm our clients in their power as well as recognise their vulnerability.

So when this aspect of self and personal capital – be it ability, skill, knowledge, education, able-bodiedness, accent, taste etc. – is made figural and is privileged by the habitus of the field, it creates a recognisable power differential. And Bourdieu writes that when this power differential is not acknowledged, when it is dismissed as ‘normal’ and legitimised, then it is exactly this ‘misrecognition’ (Bourdieu, 1977) that creates symbolic power (ibid).

Going back to the conference example, it is when the majority of participants are not native English speakers and yet, it doesn’t occur to the mostly British or American keynote speakers to slow down their speech or simplify their language. Symbolic power is manifest mostly in that this is experienced as a taken-for-granted, inevitable state of affairs even to the non-English speakers and participants who accept this as given. As Bourdieu (1977) writes, ‘symbolic violence is a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims’ (ibid, p. 192).

Unrecognised Ground: the misrecognition of belonging

The second way in which power moderates the relational moment is when power is not necessarily attached to an aspect of the individual or ‘personal capital’ but instead configures the situation. What stands out as figural in a given moment or situation, is the person’s social position as valued (or not) in the field. Bourdieu, as a twentieth-century thinker, didn’t write extensively about how social position and the broader politics of belonging intersected (e.g. engaging with feminist theories), it is clear however that social positioning today is very linked to the politics of identity and belonging.

Here is a vignette representing how Unrecognised Ground can moderate the relational moment.

It is the middle of a work meeting with clients, there is a good discussion going on between participants (who all happen to be men with the exception of one woman). As the meeting breaks for coffee, the male colleagues and clients carry on with the discussion as they head to the men’s toilets. The moment is brief, the woman’s sense of exclusion is real and, when they resume their meeting, she feels she needs to work harder to make clever points,

and not disappear. Her contribution to the meeting was valued, her skill or ability not in question, but yet an aspect of feeling ‘less than’ crept in. The wider field of gendered privilege has impacted the present moment.

Some therapists might argue that her feeling has to do with intra-personal issues, which she should work harder to overcome. Or perhaps this loss of confidence stems from prior experiences and she should take responsibility for it. Some of that might be worth exploring of course, but it doesn’t explain the full response to the very real wider field of struggle. The present moment situation was polarised in this case along very subjective lines of belonging, with clear position-takings along the gender divide and what is most valued or privileged in that workspace field. Again, in this situation, we can’t speak of oppressed or oppressor, it is the misrecognition of the ground of belonging and its historical norms that moderated the moment. It is not that long ago that women in the workplace were whistled at or even pinched when walking down the corridor at work. No one would have thought of putting in a complaint, it was just the way the world was.

As therapists and coaches, it is vital to understand and acknowledge the powerlessness of our clients when faced with symbolic power arising from a misrecognised ground and belonging. It might be easy, in such cases, to think the client is being over-sensitive or not behaving well enough according to the standards of the dominant normativity. For example, I coached an Asian man who was brilliant and very capable but excluded from the all-white, British senior group in his organisation, despite bringing a large share of the profit to the organisation. We could discuss his reluctance to act bolder or more macho; his quieter disposition that made him stand out in that culture. But that alone doesn’t explain or excuse his exclusion. It is important to recognise the subtle, even unconscious, othering that took place. I believe that we often find reluctance in our clients or coachees themselves, to discuss or accept the reality of unconscious prejudice. They often hold a belief that if they kept working on themselves, that if they tried harder, then the ‘us vs them’ divide won’t matter so much. Or is it perhaps easier to work on oneself and adapt, than change a dominant cultural positioning?

Politics of belonging

Of course, belonging isn't only about identity politics, it is also about ethical and political values (e.g. leave vs remain; Republican vs Democrat) as well as belonging to places, countries and regions. We all have many identities and many aspects of belonging, and this polarisation may emerge suddenly, even unexpectedly. It also may become exacerbated when we feel threatened or less secure in any one aspect of our belonging or when we find ourselves, in some way, part of the minority group.

This polarisation of the situation along lines of belonging and privilege speaks of course to the idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). In coining this term, Kimberley Crenshaw was pointing out that we all have many identities and that our experience as human beings is more than just the sum of these identities. For example, being a black woman in America isn't just about being black, American and female, but there are unique obstacles and indignities that affect African-American women. It is about recognising that the world isn't equal and fair across all groupings and that power (and usually wealth) has been on the side historically of some groupings more than others.

We have probably all sat with our clients in awareness of our privilege or theirs. As a therapist, when working with refugees or people from war-torn countries, I am acutely aware of my privilege to pass as a white European and to hold a Western passport and therefore not have to queue at border control checkpoints. Equally, I can sit with the privilege of my white, British client born and raised in Surrey and who never had to even consider such issues, or worry about what their passport says about where they were born.

It is important however not to associate power with positioning on the map of intersectionality. It isn't about using intersectionality as a morality map where white, heterosexual, western men are the oppressors and coloured, gay, migrant women the victims. What Bourdieu's thinking shows us is that the moderation of relational dynamics happens in the 'mis-recognition' and legitimisation of privilege and oppression as it plays out in the moment, in the particular situation. It is a dynamic, relational dance where symbolic power shapes the relational moment. There is no oppressor or oppressed, and it is important to recognise that we are seldom either completely innocent or completely guilty. We are rarely in either complete powerlessness or total omnipotence. Being human means bearing the

complexity of privilege and subordination as they play out in the moment – however difficult that may be.

The power dynamics between my client and me are therefore not static, nor are they determined by our identity alone. Fields of power emerge in the moment as features of our ground and context are highlighted, our habitus made explicit, as our contextual power is made figural through an aspect of our self or situation, an aspect of our personal capital or our positioning/belonging.

A systemic enactment

Having covered in the sections above two key moderations of fields of power, it is interesting to also see them enacted at a systemic level.

The tyranny of individualism

The first systemic power moderation happens when people, organisations or even whole countries seem to prioritise the 'Self' lens. In so doing, they are more blind to 'Situation' and 'Other' and tend to reify and value aspects of ability and personal capital over anything else.

An example of this stance is what Michael Sandel, the American political philosopher, called the 'Tyranny of Merit' (Sandel, 2020). Sandel argues that meritocracy, a very prevalent and liberal notion in the West, tells us that those who are successful and are at the top are there because they deserve it and it is only due to their ability. And for those who are not successful, it is their fault for not earning it or working hard enough for it (ibid). This view, which makes us buy into the myth of the self-made and self-sufficient individual, is also deeply unjust because it pretends that people succeed just because of their own ability. Unjust as it ignores everything and everyone that has helped or enabled these individuals: whether rich parents, connected teachers, systems or institutions they are part of. The misrecognition of privilege and symbolic power is very large indeed.

The symbolic aspect of this systemic moderation is most striking as it celebrates individual achievement and ability whilst keeping the inclusion/exclusion practices that have led to these achievements very much in ground. So much in ground, that the individual's accomplishments and successes appear as the natural order of things rather than a biased or uneven form of distribution of power. Bourdieu's work here is useful as he reminds us that most situations include a bias

towards the more powerful already (1977) and this bias stems precisely from the normalising effect of symbolic power.

The ossified situation

The second systemic moderation happens when wider fields of struggle get either dismissed (unrecognised) or overemphasised (reified) in the service of maintaining or gaining power in any given situation. This dismissal (or overstating) of wider field struggles can lead to the ossification of the situation in the moment. This ossification can happen at the level of a whole organisation, community or even country.

When considering the fight for emancipation across the history of many minority groups (women's liberation, gay rights, etc.) wishing to be heard, listened to, and given equal rights, we can see how whole systems might dismiss and downplay the struggle of non-dominant groups in order to maintain the status quo of power. In the initial stages of most social movements, it is usually only a handful of activists that hold the non-dominant perspective and keep challenging the field's habitus. Haugaard (2008) argues that typically about twenty years is needed for a habitus to change. He goes on to say that the 'habitus is a gestalt ordering of the external world, which can be consciously changed through being made discursive' (Hauggard, 2008. p. 193) And that takes time and a certain amount of awareness raising and articulation of the power-differential.

Paradoxically, once recognised and articulated, power struggles can also be over-emphasised and so focused upon in a given situation as to exclude the Self and Other lenses. When this happens, the tensions and polarisations of the given situation are focused upon to the exclusion of all else. This leads to a different type of ossification where each situation is only viewed as a battleground between 'us' vs 'them', between the dominant and dominated groups, whilst both the individual (Self) experience and the sense of the Other are lost. The battle around identity politics today seems to be such an example and the phenomenon of cancel culture on university campuses also takes this power struggle to extremes.

What gets focused upon at a systemic level is where the individual belongs, and which grouping he/she identifies with, whilst their phenomenological experience remains unexplored or, at worst, dismissed. Only focusing on a person's identity as part of a minority/majority group robs them of the possibility to be different in some situations. Indeed, not all black people

feel or think the same and not all women or gay people have the same experience.

The power of the situation can become such that nothing else matters. We have seen this in many polarised positions in our world today: leave vs remain, black vs white, Palestinian vs Jew, Republican vs Democrat; every interaction is seen as a power play between these polarised groupings. Every interaction becomes a battleground over either who is better, who is in the right, or even who has suffered more, is more oppressed and, therefore, is entitled to more. Losing sight of the phenomenological intent and sense of connection opens the door for a type of social activism for the oppressed which makes a mockery of the much-needed activism for situations that require it most.

Robert Greene in his book *The 48 Laws of Power* (Greene, 1998) writes that individuals don't emphasise their weakness without self-interest or a power move and that 'true powerlessness, without any motive of self-interest, would not publicise its weakness to gain sympathy or respect. Making a show of one's weakness is actually a very effective strategy, subtle and deceptive, in the game of power.' This is not to say that there are not very many social, political and economic issues that need us to fight and keep fighting for and to keep highlighting. The need for equity, not just equality, is a constant battle about which we all need to stay aware and vigilant.

Implications for us and our practice

And so what? What lessons do we need to take away from recognising the way power moderates our behaviour and contact with ourselves and others in an insidious and often implicit way. What does it mean in practice for us as Gestaltists and relational practitioners?

First, we must, as practitioners immersed in fields of power (be they social, political or economic), keep informed and aware. We must stay curious about how changing cultures and customs may be shaping fields of power (be they supportive or not). Only in doing so may we avoid placing the burden or responsibility for shame and powerlessness at the individual level, and have a better chance of recognising the fields of power we are immersed in. Paul Goodman sought, in his contribution to Gestalt, to free 'the individual from the oppression of the state' (Stoehr, 1994) and in his time, the sequels of the Second World War, the Holocaust and Hiroshima all pointed to the failures of the state and governments – those legitimate authorities who held

power. Today, however, in our contemporary world, the legitimate authority has largely been supplanted and powers have become more diffuse, decentred and de-subjectified (Yval-Davis, 2011). We are therefore more likely to speak of the power of Silicon Valley and the influence of social media on our culture and youth. We must stay aware and bring the social and political struggles to our work openly (to our therapy, coaching, organisational work and supervision) and dare to speak them not just when we are of the same opinion or side as our client, but mostly when we differ. Speak them, even when we feel the ossification of situations through the overstating of polarised struggles. This in particular is a point needing urgent attention and exploration in both organisational and educational settings.

With power more diffuse, we can no longer point the finger at the leader or politician and blame him or her. Today, more than ever, the future of a better and less divided world lies with each of us. It lies in our capacity to use power wisely to contain, support and collaborate rather than dominate. Yasha Mounk in his book *The Great Experiment* (Mounk, 2022), writes how democratic stability varies in different societies. He points out that ethnic diversity is not destabilising by itself, but that diversity challenges democracy when it hardens into a winner-takes-all struggle for power between two sides (i.e. a dominant vs an oppressed side). Rather than succumb to the ease of polarising into us-vs-them, we could usefully remain open to multilarities (Zinker, 1977) as the possibility of a multitude of differences and, that several opposites may exist to any one polarity. Mounk (2022) reminds us that ensuring all groups have some power, some ‘freedom of movement’, is the best way to ensure a stable society. There needs of course to be a balance between power-sharing (that can when taken to extreme deprive elections of meaning) and the us-vs-them divide that is, for example, so threatening in the USA today.

As we fully recognise our interrelatedness, each one of us needs to take responsibility within the fields of power we inhabit. An essential component of this is a reflexive stance towards ourselves. How can we get in touch with our own internalised privilege and subordination? How can we each sit with the knowledge that none of us is entirely innocent or entirely guilty? In the two moderations outlined in this paper, symbolic power arises from either the *self* or *situation* lenses, and ultimately the answer to both these polarised positions lies in reaching to the *other*. Not reaching just through understanding, which we may not always be able to do as we each inhabit our own habitus, but

reaching out with compassion. As Gestalt practitioners who work with embodiment, we need to be attentive to the shifts in ourselves and others that signal shame and powerlessness. And this is because cognitive understanding often, like the cavalry, arrives too late. Let us listen to the wisdom of our bodies and open ourselves to sense the power shifts in the field, those early signals that will allow us to slow down and reach the other.

Conclusion

This article, and the lecture on which it is based, arose from a very real need to make sense of a changing world in which power, whether social, political or economic, seemed increasingly confusing. Holding an ethical presence (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2020) and stance in such a world requires us as practitioners to understand how this power manifests and how we may be more aware of the fields of power in which we are immersed.

I hope this article will mark the beginning of an ongoing dialogue between Gestalt theory and contemporary concepts of power. Through Lewin’s field theory, Gestalt has already a view of how the phenomenal field shapes behaviour. The contribution of Bourdieu’s thinking adds the systemic social space as a dimension through which power can also manifest.

With a better understanding of power comes a greater ability to be ethically present and responsive to the way it moderates the moment. Today the ossification of situations is presenting a great challenge to us, whether in education, politics or organisational settings. More is needed to not just recognise the power struggle, but also explore how to work with it ethically. I write this as an invitation to other Gestalt and relational practitioners to attend with me to this urgent point.

I would like to conclude by returning to Michel Foucault who in his last talk in English in 1983 (Foucault, 2001), spoke of the subject of parrhesia which he defined as ‘a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)’ (ibid, pp. 19–20). So, when we are immersed in fields of power, we can either succumb to them or choose to speak truth to power. I hope this article has contributed somewhat to support and enable this truth-telling.

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Notes

¹ This article is based on a lecture I gave at the 2022 Marianne Fry Lecture in September 2022. It captures my early thoughts on a topic which I hope will keep evolving within Gestalt field and beyond. An audio copy of the lecture is available via the Marianne Fry website.

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