

Voice Use in Social Process

Conference: Social Change - Gestalt Principles and Practices

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Oral Presentation by Susan Gregory

Introduction

The members of my extended family have arrived for Thanksgiving dinner. Relatives crowd into the kitchen, depositing favorite dishes they have brought to share and taking up tasks to help prepare the meal. Other members of the family sit down in the living room and begin a voluble ritual of catching up. It's been a year or more since all of us have been in one home together.

My relatives have come from New Jersey, Connecticut, California, and Brooklyn, the family center, to assemble in my downtown Manhattan apartment for the holiday. Hearing them speak, several voices at once, I notice that, in coming together, we have all taken on the same dialect, a Yiddish-inflected Brooklynese which none of us speaks in any other surroundings. Unawarely and energetically we are using the *mameloshn* (mother tongue) to reinforce our group identity and signify our common roots.

Paul Goodman on speech

In this paper, I will look at how people use their voices to reinforce social identity and relationship. Attention to spoken language, its music and meanings, have been part of Gestalt therapy from its founding. In the chapter "Verbalizing and Poetry" (*Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*), Paul Goodman wrote, "It's useful to define personality as a structure of speech habits". (320) He contrasts "speech as good contact" with neurotic or uncontactful "verbalizing". (322). And he refers to the felt act, the phenomenon, of "the sounding speech - the physical exercise of uttering and hearing" (322). In Gestalt therapy's foundational text, then, Goodman pays attention to the act of speaking, to voice use, and by implication to the oral/aural field.

Paul Goodman's interest in language, its sound, structure and content, was

finely tuned. He was a poet as well as an activist in his community. In these undertakings he called upon both his sensitivity to language's prosody and his interest in using it to accomplish practical ends. Goodman discussed both parole and langue, to use Saussure's distinction between the act of speaking and the structure of language, and writes about them in *Speaking and Language* (1971). In that book he makes explicit the relational nature of voiced language, saying that the speaker and hearer are engaged in a transaction and that they are "intervening in the world...What they act on and shape is the inherent [social] code they have learned in their speech-community." (33)

Goodman points out that speech is different in intimate groups than it is in functional groups, a distinction amplified and worked with in the presentation entitled *Balancing Intimate and Strategic Interactions* given by Ed and Sonia Nevis in New York City in 1993. Paul speaks of group solidarity/identity as leading to the formation of sub-languages, exemplified by the opening vignette in this paper, which are "self defensive and self affirming for group members" (61) enabling them, in specific interactions, to differentiate from persons he calls "speakers of the prestige idiom".

And with regard to the limits of language, Goodman points out that a person in pain or mourning "cannot use the common grammar" (52), and that other vocal sounds and imprecations are emitted in those circumstances. From my perspective, unlanguage vocalizations made in extremis are sounds associated with id functioning; and language use, for me, is associated with ego and personality functioning.

In *Speaking and Language*, Paul points out that, "Speaking is social glue". Gestalt therapist Philip Lichtenberg has written extensively on just how such social glue is subject to attenuation by acts of projecting and how we may, by the quality of our conversations with each other, attempt to undo projecting in order to hear more fully what we each have to say. His book *Encountering Bigotry*, written with Beuskom and Gibblons, could be read as an instructional manual on how to engage in productive oral/aural discourse. And, In *Community and Confluence: Undoing the Clinch of Oppression*, Lichtenberg looks at how group members interact, quoting dozens of examples of

productive or unproductive oral communication among members of groups. So that, while the book is highly theoretical, it is filled with practical examples and suggestions for use in groups engaged in the work of social change. Looking at how group members' taking back projections in the service of open colloquy may help secure democratic institutions and societies, Lichtenberg continues to expand upon his theories in articles in Gestalt journals worldwide.

Shedding light upon the same subject from a different academic orientation, linguistic anthropologist Richard Bauman draws our attention to the use of grooming as an essential social regulator in primate groups (*Verbal Art as Performance*). He points to the work of Arillo and Dunbar who posit that, as hominid groups grew larger, making it impossible for every member to groom every other one, singing and speaking became "vocal grooming, an expression of mutual interest and commitment that could be simultaneously shared with more than one individual." Bauman goes on to write about "the linguistic aspects of the socialization process", including gossip, prayer, children's games, riddles, proverbs, myths - the principal research area of structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss - and songs.

More than thirty of Paul Goodman's poems were set to music by contemporary composer New Rorem, and by Paul himself. One of these was written at the piano in Erv and Miriam Polster's home. I have a copy of this song, which Miriam gave me. It sounds like this....(I sang it for the assembled participants at this point in the presentation.)

Singing

Language is conveyed not only by speaking, but also by singing. Some scholars, including anthropologists David Attenborough (*Song of the Earth*) and historian Steven Mithen (*The Singing Neanderthals*), believe that in early human society singing preceded speech. This theory is supported by research from other scholarly directions, including investigations in animal communications at the department of biomusicality at MIT, and work on oral/aural aspects of infant development taking place in England by researchers including Colin Trevarthen and Mechtilde Papousek. I have

written about these areas of inquiry in another paper "Singing and Social Identity" and quote briefly from that paper here:

Group singing is so ordinary a practice that we tend not to notice its power in our lives. Yet singing is an ancient way that groups prepare to carry out mutual activity and soothe themselves when activity is done. Singing influences people's physiology, emotions and thought in an integrated activity whose roots are evolutionary deep within us. This is intrinsically understood by soccer fans, field laborers, birthday celebrants, army platoons and almost all groupings where coordinated effort must be accomplished. Stunningly, there was even singing in some work brigades of the Nazi concentration camps.

In large groups, an individual can hear farther than s/he can see. Sound aurally defines the group boundary and signifies cultural identity of that configuration. This is true of groups whose members are geographically proximal as well as of those whose members are dispersed. They remain identified through language, vocal prosody, and song.

Sociologist Richard Jenkins believes that human activities which allow persons to symbolize group membership, including vocalizing activities, provide a social holding environment which "allows both individual diversity and collective similarity to coexist" (*Social Identity*).

In writing about field theory, phenomenologist Don Ihde speaks of a "vocal horizon" which may arise from or be maintained by singing or speech, including oratory (*Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound*). He also reminds readers that "sound embodies the sense of time." As a therapist, I extend that to include an understanding that individual's identification with his/her own history over time and with that of groups with which s/he identifies, is stimulated by singing and speaking activities, which themselves may be experienced as making time manifest.

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of "the singing of the world" and states, "I hear with my whole body, the ears being the focal organs." Merleau-Ponty is frequently referred to by Gestalt therapists and teachers Jean-Marie Robine and Michael Vincent Miller.

In his unfinished book *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty states, "Language is enacted and evolving...It is a living presence."

In fact, we may reflect that not only is language a living presence, it may also be considered a promoter of life. Dramatic proof of this lies in experiments carried out by Emperor Frederick II in the 13th Century. Frederick was interested in the origin of language and wanted to test his belief that babies have an inborn ability to speak. He gathered babies from households throughout his kingdom and had them raised in his palace with every need attended to save one. The nurses were forbidden to speak with the babies or with each other in the babies' presence. Every single child died. (Abalafia).

Moving forward to reflect upon speaking in our times, Daniel Golman, in his recent book *Social Intelligence*, decries the use of iPods and other personal listening devices, saying that "Blocked ears make us Not There." (sic) and hence not available for social interaction. This leads us to realize that the power of voiced language to act as social "glue" requires a field in which people are mutually sounding and hearing one another. It requires the liveliness of contact facilitated by open senses.

Conclusion

Persons who are working in the area of social change, who are leading people to negotiate, to hear each other, to see each other's humanity face to face, and those who are trying day by day to live efforts toward social change, would do well to attend to how we speak with and hear one another, and even - we should be so lucky! - how we sing together. As Gestalt therapists and organizational practitioners, we may find support for attending to details of voice use in the writings of one of our foundational authors, Paul Goodman, as well as in writings and teachings of distinguished Gestalt practitioners today, including Philip Lichtenberg, Ed Nevis, Gaie Huston, Gary Yontef and others who have shed light on the ways relationship, including group culture, is influenced by how we talk with one another.

We may draw inspiration, too, from practitioners of oral communication in other fields. Here is a quote from a man who has risked his life writing,

teaching and singing songs. He is the Iranian composer, performer and teacher Hossein Alizadah. The words below appear in the liner notes of his new CD, and are dated January 2007, "Social interaction and expression are fundamental to the human spirit - communion, collective forums, mass struggle, celebrations, and funerary rites are but some of the more vivid reflections of this facet of our existence. They come into focus as they express the power of the many, the exuberance of interdependence, and deep-rooted human need for sympathetic action...multi voiced and choral performance is the true instrument for giving shape to such social phenomena."

If we Gestaltists here at this conference speak of social change, then we must use our voices to do so and must hear the voices of others in our mutual exchange. Our foundational text, through Paul Goodman's words, made this clear from the beginning.

Discussion questions

1. Can you think of a social situation in which you modify your voice use to fit in with the group you identify with?
2. Can you think of a social situation in which someone's voice use - volume, tempo, vocabulary, syntax - caused you to feel uncomfortable.
3. In addition to content, what other aspects of oral/aural exchange facilitate or interfere with relationship?
4. Given that voice use is an embodied experience, how do you see the sequence of contacting affected by e-mailing?
5. How do you think cell phones and MP3 players are affecting human relating?