

Discussion – Diskussion

THE ANALYSIS OF (ORGANIZATIONAL) GESTALTEN

A reply to Luchins & Luchins

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Introduction

Sometimes the life of an ordinary management scientist contains unexpected surprises. Such a surprise happened when, on my last office day before Christmas break 2000, I happened to browse through the *Gestalt Theory* home page and clicked on the contents of the 1999 volume. It turned out that two eminent Gestalt scientists, Abraham and Edith LUCHINS, had written a quite elaborate comment on my article “The organizational Gestalt - Images of organization revisited”, which appeared in the 1997 volume of *Gestalt Theory*. In the opening paragraph they stated:

“We found VISSER’s entire paper of great interest, especially the references to the writings of GRELLING and OPPENHEIM. We had originally hoped that our queries and comments [...] would have reached him in time to be incorporated into his paper, if he cared to do so. But perhaps they are still timely.” (LUCHINS & LUCHINS 1999b, p.55)

Unfortunately, they were not, due to many circumstances, the most important one probably being my involvement in private business for four years and concomitant changes of work address.

Reading back my original and LUCHINS & LUCHINS’ article, my paper undoubtedly would have benefited from “timely incorporation” of their remarks. In the remainder of this short reply I will comment on their comments.

A reply to LUCHINS & LUCHINS

The kindly worded yet incisive discussion of my article by LUCHINS & LUCHINS is divided in two parts. In the first part, they “confess to a bias in favor of original sources over (and in addition to) secondary sources” (LUCHINS & LUCHINS 1999b, p.55). I concur in this bias. In fact, the 1997 article is documented on the basis of my earlier Ph.D. research on voting behavior in elections (VISSER 1994; 1998). This research contains an analysis of the theoretical background of five psychological schools in voting research, to wit the Columbia,

Michigan, cognitive, psychodynamic and humanistic schools. In tracing their antecedents, it was possible to find considerable common theoretical ground between these five. An important role in this analysis was played by Kurt LEWIN, Kurt GOLDSTEIN and Fritz HEIDER, who, while more or less standing in the Gestalt tradition, influenced four of the five schools mentioned.

In dealing with this wide scope of psychological schools, my use of original sources necessarily stopped at the English language sources. This explains the use of ELLIS (1938) and SMITH (1988), rather than the original German texts. Clearly, LUCHINS & LUCHINS have investigated the background of these particular English language sources in much greater detail than I was able to do at the time of my Ph.D. research. However, their comments on this point support my own scientific inclinations.

The second part of LUCHINS & LUCHINS' comments concentrates on the 'EHRENFELS criteria' in relation to the work of GRELLING and OPPENHEIM. My own thinking on this matter was primarily influenced by SIMONS' (1988) treatise on Gestalt and functional dependence, as is expressed in the reference at the end of the paragraph starting with "In his philosophical treatise" (VISSER 1997, p.233). Further, my discussion of GRELLING & OPPENHEIM was much informed by their 'modern logic' and 'supplementary remarks' papers (GRELLING & OPPENHEIM 1988ab) and less so by their 'functional whole' paper (GRELLING & OPPENHEIM 1988c; see SIMONS 1988, pp.158-159, and LUCHINS & LUCHINS 1999a, for a historical background review of these works). Combining SIMONS and the first two GRELLING & OPPENHEIM papers in an admittedly somewhat summarily fashion resulted in those paragraphs of which LUCHINS & LUCHINS (1999b, pp.58-59) argue that the EHRENFELS criteria and the GRELLING & OPPENHEIM work are too much confounded. While recognizing their authority in this field, I respectfully disagree with this argument.

As LUCHINS & LUCHINS (1999b, p.58) observe, GRELLING & OPPENHEIM referred to only two EHRENFELS criteria in their 'modern logic' article. Indeed they wrote:

"EHRENFELS considers it a criterion for something's being a Gestalt that it remains unaltered by transposition [...]. The second of the two so-called EHRENFELS criteria has become a popular catchword in the form: 'The Gestalt is more than the sum of its parts'"(GRELLING & OPPENHEIM 1988a, p.198).

SIMONS (1988, p.164) adds the condition of "one-sided dependence on the basis or fundament". In fact, this criterion can be derived from von EHRENFELS' definition of Gestalt quality:

"By a Gestalt quality we understand a positive content of presentation bound up in consciousness with the presence of complexes of mutually separable (i.e. independently presentable) elements. That complex of presentations which is necessary for the existence of a given Gestalt quality we call the *foundation* [*Grundlage*] of that quality" (von EHRENFELS 1988, p.93; italics CvE).

It seems clear that a fundament in this sense constitutes a *conditio sine qua non* for the existence of a Gestalt by any definition, including GRELLING & OPPENHEIM's: without parts no whole can properly exist. Therefore it is not unreasonable to adopt this condition as one of three EHRENFELS criteria, even if it attains somewhat more prominence in SIMONS' account than in the original work.

Regarding the transposition criterion, GRELLING & OPPENHEIM (1988a, p.198) note that their own "concept of Gestalt always fulfils this criterion". The second criterion is translated in their terminology as: "The Gestalt of a complex is a property which cannot meaningfully be ascribed to the totality of its parts corresponding to any division" (GRELLING & OPPENHEIM 1988a, p.199).

In the next section they proceed to compare 'determinational systems' to 'Gestalten' and observe:

„The meaning of the word 'Gestalt' has undergone a change in the course of time, in that it has steadily shifted away from EHRENFELS' 'Gestalt qualities' to a concept which KÖHLER calls 'organized whole' and KOFFKA calls 'functional whole'[...]. We now assert that the two concepts just mentioned coincide with our concept of a determinational system [...]. Against KÖHLER and KOFFKA, we suggest using the term 'Gestalt' as in ordinary language and in the other sciences only in the original Ehrenfelsian sense" (GRELLING & OPPENHEIM 1988a, p.201).

Following this distinction, GRELLING and OPPENHEIM (1988a, p.203) then apply the two EHRENFELS criteria to determinational systems and suggest appropriate translations into the terminology they employ. They specifically note that the transposability criterion is not essential to the explanatory function of the concept of determinational system, a point of importance in my paper.

In my opinion here the two EHRENFELS criteria clearly inform GRELLING and OPPENHEIM's discussion of the Gestalt concepts developed by von EHRENFELS and the Berlin Gestalt school, even when in their other papers these criteria do not seem to play a role, as LUCHINS & LUCHINS (1999b, p.59) argue. However, for the purpose of the 1997 paper (which, after all, centered on images of organizations) my interpretation seems to be reasonably rooted in GRELLING & OPPENHEIM (1988ab). This is so, even though my article admittedly glossed over some subtle distinctions in their analysis, to which the review by LUCHINS & LUCHINS rightfully draws attention.

Zusammenfassung

Der Kommentar von LUCHINS & LUCHINS (1999b) stellt eine freundlich formulierte und doch einschneidende Diskussion der philosophischen Grundlage des Beitrags von Max VISSER über „organizational Gestalten“ (1997) dar. In der vorliegenden Replik erkennt VISSER den Wert dieses Kommentars an, besonders was den Rekurs auf die Primärquellen gegenüber der Sekundärliteratur angeht. Was die Bedeutung der EHRENFELSschen Gestaltkriterien im Werk von GRELLING und OPPENHEIM angeht, stellt VISSER heraus,

daß seine Interpretation durch wenigstens einen Artikel der angeführten Philosophen ausreichend belegt ist.

Summary

The comments of LUCHINS & LUCHINS on VISSER's paper on organizational Gestalten provide a kindly worded yet incisive discussion of the philosophical basis of that paper. In this reply VISSER acknowledges the value of these comments, in particular those pertaining to the use of original sources over secondary sources. Regarding the role of the EHRENFELS criteria in the work of GRELLING & OPPENHEIM, VISSER argues that his specific interpretation is reasonably rooted in at least one major article of these philosophers.

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