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A timely anthology showcasing Theory U and presencing perspectives from the latest research of practitioners in the field.
Chapter 7
Social Fields As An Awareness-Based Approach To Reconnect Self, Other, and Whole

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Introduction

In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the world. The experience of a shared threat provoked adaptations on different levels of society. On an individual level, the global community had to adapt to new forms of everyday life in schooling (Viner et al., 2020), work-life (Mækelæ et al., 2020), and family interactions (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020; Thompson & Rasmussen, 2020) within weeks. As a society, federal governments freed unprecedented financial support for the economy (e.g., Partington, 2020; cf. Evans, Lawson, Fenton, & Donovan, for a review), new forms of collaboration evolved rapidly (e.g., Appuzzo & Kirkpatrick, 2020; Koelbl, Lüdke, Peters, Pitzke, & Stöhr, 2020), and citizens supported the needs of vulnerable subgroups and the greater good (Hirsch, 2020).

Whereas the obviousness of the challenge certainly required straightforward solutions, one might wonder if and how a new
understanding of self, other, and whole might have facilitated these responses. More precisely, instead of a political debate that occurred far-off from its citizens, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a real challenge evolving rapidly in front of our eyes and required collective responses on a personal, community, national, and global level. These responses, in turn, emerged as moment-to-moment real-life experiences with practical consequences for all of us.

We interpret the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of how a directly shared experience alters the awareness of self, others, and whole. Taking a social field approach, we argue that the form of interbeing between individual, others, and whole within the salient landscape of social relationships informs the quality of resulting action. Whereas, as more fleshed out below, some configurations (i.e., the organization of interrelationships between self, other, and whole) create stuckness (Scharmer, 2016), we contend that an experience-elicited reconfiguration of the social field may enable collective action and system change by bridging the knowledge-action gap (Scharmer, 2019).

This chapter is divided into three parts. In part 1, we will briefly introduce social fields and argue for an integrated examination thereof from both social science and a phenomenological awareness-based social fields perspective. Based on that, we will explore three empirical cases in which particular shifts of awareness can be interpreted as reconfigurations of the social field. In the second part, we will suggest advancing the understanding of social fields in the context of phenomenology and Gestalt psychology. Applying a two-dimensional conceptualization of social fields (see Figure 1 (Matrix of awareness-based action; adapted with permission from Scharmer, 2016, p. 242; cf. Scharmer, 2017)), we discuss the configuration of self and other dependent on its absence and presence of source and self vs. other, as well as its effect on action. The final section describes a practical example of how U-practitioners can make the quality of each social field tangible, as well as propose questions for future research.
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Part I: Three Empirical Cases of Self, Other, and Whole

A Brief Introduction Into Social Fields

Scharmer (2016) describes social fields as social systems seen and experienced from within. In his framework, two axes compose four different configurations of social fields. First, the horizontal axis displays the extent to which one is aware of self vs. other. Second, the vertical axis describes the degree to which one is attentive to and operates from the source of a not-yet-embodied future that wants to emerge. The resulting quadrants compose four distinct patterns of awareness-based qualities of relationships between self, other, and whole. Starting from the lower left, one can understand these four fundamental patterns of action moving from micro (thinking/listening/individual), and, going counterclockwise, to meso (conversing/group), macro (structuring/institutions), and mundo (ecosystem coordinating/global...
systems; cf. Scharmer, 2017, for a review). Put differently, the matrix of awareness-based action (Scharmer, 2016) thus spells out a landscape of four different qualities of action-awareness. In cell 1, thinking is restricted, individual, and potentially self-absorbed. In this mode, one operates from habitual awareness and the past, listens from a downloading perspective and habits of thoughts. In cell 4, in contrast, thinking is collective, visionary, and potentiality-driven, as it expresses the coordinating social body.

Again, our core argument for this chapter is that it is the way in which self, other, and whole are configured to each other that inform the way we behave. From cell 1 to cell 4, the change in configuration progressively enhances our ability to respond collectively. If one understands the ability for collective response as the necessary ingredient for response ability (Sacks, 2011), this implies that the likelihood for us to become collectively responsible increases the more the configuration of the social field shifts from cell 1 to cell 4.

If our argument finds support, this will help understanding why knowing often fails to translate into action (Scharmer, 2016). Put differently, finding the hidden factors driving from one configuration of social fields (i.e., cell 1) to another (i.e., cell 4) allows to move from the stuckness of numerous scattered individuals (i.e., cells 1 and 2) into a collective body acting out of an embodied shared knowing (i.e., cells 3 and 4). Next, we will briefly explain why a consideration of social scientific research is necessary before we discuss three cases in which a shift in the configuration of the social field seems to occur.

Integrating Awareness-Based Social Fields and Social Scientific Research

A central aim of this chapter is to explore the quality of the social field as the context of awareness from which any action is taken. Although a better understanding of the translation from awareness to action is vital for both researchers and practitioners, we contend that this connection still requires additional elabora-
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tion. With this chapter, we thus attempt to spark both awareness-based social fields researchers’ and practitioners’ interest in examining the underlying mechanisms through which different qualities of awareness predict corresponding types of action.

One approach to enable collective capacity for action following a change in self-perception is suggested by Theory U (Scharmer, 2009, 2016). Theory U-practice is focused on postures, processes, and tools that facilitate shifts in individual and collective self-perception towards a deepened and shared sense of reality as a condition for effective action. For more than 20 years, Theory U has been used to invent and prototype ways to deal with socio-ecological dysfunction and global disruption (see Scharmer, 2016, for examples).

However, opportunities to draw from various sources of social scientific theory and evidence have, to our knowledge, rarely been taken. A reason for this might be that, although these sources seem fruitful, their integration is challenging. On the one hand, an overemphasis of quantifiable third-person perspective research may deaden Theory U and other action-oriented approaches. On the other hand, the use of more rigorous scientific tools would allow underpinning action-oriented approaches and provide additional justification using them in the field more effectively. In short, it seems that an integration of these two approaches could provide scientifically proven but practically relevant results.

The purpose of this chapter is thus to take first steps into an exploration of how social fields and the reconfiguration thereof (i.e., the alternation of interbeing between self, other, and whole) based on altered individual and collective self-awareness determines the quality of an intended action and how it is being executed. This idea follows the awareness-based social fields research approach taken by the Presencing Institute (Scharmer, 2009, 2016), which claims that we first need to understand the role of awareness and collective consciousness change to fully embrace what social change entails and how it can be initiated. More precisely, this agenda follows three assumptions named by Scharmer, Pomeroy, and Kaufer (in prep.):
1. “You cannot understand a system unless you change it.
2. You cannot change a system unless you transform the consciousness of those enacting the system.
3. You cannot transform consciousness unless you make the system sense and see itself.” (p. 2).

Hence, the first part of this chapter tries to prototypically explore three phenomena that substantiate shifts U-practitioners have been observing with current psychological research. To do so, we selected examples relating to some of the core movements in the U-process, which are seeing, sensing, and presencing. According to Theory U, the first step of transformational social change is about starting to see the challenge. The underlying assumption is that if different stakeholders (or, as social science would phrase it, belongingness to different in-groups; Turner & Oakes, 1986) can see a shared challenge, they will enhance their ability to act. The first empirical case thus describes how different forms of threat alter the experience of self and others and predicts different attitudes towards others.

Second, Theory U postulates that seeing is a different level of knowing than sensing. As a second empirical case, we will thus present a project that investigated the emotion of awe as a driver of an altered experience of the self, which then predicted a change in behavior towards more prosocial action.

Third, we will discuss research on the overview effect (Yaden et al., 2016) as an empirical case in which presencing becomes evident. This allows expanding our understanding of social fields from a third- and second-person perspective to a first-person perspective. As such, the overview effect is a first-person account illustrating the interplay of two interacting patterns of changing relationships; that is, a change in self-other and mind-body awareness, leading towards life-long behavior change in astronauts.
Empirical Case 1: Experiences of Self vs. Other Predicts Attitudes

Pyszczynski and colleagues (2012) examined how the experience of different types of threats impacts the perception of an outgroup. Across three studies, they found that while the perception of a local threat increased intergroup aggression, the “increased awareness of the shared threat of global climate change can, at least under some conditions, reduce support for war and promote efforts at peaceful coexistence and international cooperation.” (p.363). Crucially, this finding suggests that although the perception of threat may increase aggression when experienced from a subordinate group perspective, “existential threat does not always increase intergroup conflict” (p.359). In contrast, when experienced from the stance of the superordinate group that is affected by the same shared threat, this threat may encourage people’s support for peace-building and cooperation in the light of an experienced “common humanity” (p. 354).

Together, these findings suggest that the experience of a shared catastrophe may even have a unifying effect on conflicting parties. This is in line with the COVID-19 example given in the outset of this chapter, in which various regions and countries experienced a shared threat (i.e., the virus), consequences (i.e., curfews, quarantine, social distancing, etc.), and resulting societal debates (i.e., discussions on democracy and basic fundamental rights). Interestingly, a key explanation for why the pandemic produced both a trend toward subgroup salience (i.e., the national rivalry for medical supplies; Blasberg, Fahrion, Sarovic, & Schaap, 2020) and a trend for more subgroup support (i.e., cooperation in patient treatment; e.g., Hallam, 2020) may be found in consideration of whether the parties experienced the threat as shared. Based on Pyszczynski and colleagues (2012), one would argue that the pandemic created egocentric behavior and conflict when it was perceived as local, but initiated cooperation when it was seen as shared. From a social field’s perspective, one might argue that perception of the threat as local and fear-driven produced the rivaling, aggressive trend (cell 2), while it facilitated cooperation and shared action when it was experienced as a
common and whole-directed menace targeting shared humanity (cell 4).

In sum, as social fields are argued to be predictive for the quality of action, this empirical case is informative for understanding the attitude that underlies such behavior. The shift taken in this case is probably from cell 2 to cell 3, such that two opposing subgroups merged from a conflict configuration towards an integrated superordinate group bearing collective suffering. However, this case is limited in two aspects. First, even if an altered experience of oneself moved subgroup individuals to be members of a superordinate group, the experience still was an individual one, such that the response remained threat-based rather than driven by empathy. Second, although attitudes are an important predictor of behavior, an attitude does not always translate into respective behavior (Reeve, 2008). It is thus fruitful to look into another example, in which actual behavioral consequences of a changed self-experience have been assessed.

Empirical Case 2: The Impact of Self-Experience on Behavior

Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, and Keltner (2015) investigated the effect of awe on prosocial behavior. While we may feel awe when listening to certain music, while being in nature, or during spiritual experiences, psychological research defines it as “an emotional response to perceptually vast stimuli that defy one’s accustomed frame of reference in some domain” (Piff et al., 2015, p. 883; cf. Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). Experiences of awe provoke this frame of reference to shift internally (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), and thus provides the inner capacity to fully relate to a situation or stimulus. Based on Piff and colleagues’ (2015) understanding that awe elicits a “feeling of being diminished in the presence of something greater than the self, and the motivation to be good to others” (p. 883), one’s position on the scale describing the relationship of self and whole in Scharmer’s (2016) matrix of awareness-based action seems to move.

Interestingly, Piff and colleagues (2015) do not only find that
people experiencing awe tended to be, compared to participants in various control conditions, more prosocial, and make more ethically correct decisions. Moreover, trying to understand why this particular emotion led to increased prosociality, the authors claimed a change in self-perception to be the underlying mechanism. Across five studies, they found that awe would trigger a “relative diminishment of the individual self and its interests vis-à-vis something perceived to be more vast and powerful than oneself” (p. 895), which, in turn, increased the likelihood for behaving prosocially. In short, the experience of awe as a response to something more meaningful than oneself indeed creates a feeling of relative insignificance, which then increases the inclination to contribute to the greater good. Building upon the first empirical case, this project does not only suggest that the experience of the self is important for attitudes but indeed directly informs the way we behave. Still, the shift in the social field configuration maintains a cell 3-quality as the action is, although prosocial and based on an empathetic emotion, an individual one. We will thus consider a third case that examined the impact of a change in self-perception on behavior in cell 4.

Empirical Case 3: A View From Above Changes Social and Earth Connectedness

The term overview effect has been coined by space philosopher Frank White (1987) in his research on the intense feelings that astronauts reported when seeing earth from space. It refers to a “cognitive shift in awareness” linked to “the experience of seeing firsthand the reality that the earth is in space” (Ferreira, 2016, p.1.). It brings together three types of relational shifts as experienced from various first-person and second-person accounts. First, these accounts describe a profound experience of awe reframing who one is and what one needs to do. Second, they describe the shift of awareness from a conceptual understanding of earth to connecting to a living being. Third, they describe a shift of identity from professional astronauts to experiencing themselves as the extended sensing organ of the human-earth body.
Edgar Mitchell, an Apollo 14 astronaut, described this experience as the development of “an instant global consciousness” (Yaden et al., 2016, p. 5). While experiencing earth from space seems to be more than a feeling, the earth seems to be perceived as more than just being an object. The experience engages the viewer-astronaut in a profound relationship with a living being that is coming into being. Indeed, astronaut James Irwin experienced a “beautiful, warm living object [that] looked so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger, it would crumble and fall apart” (Irwin, 1973; as cited in Ferreira, 2016, p. 1), and astronaut Sandra Magnus reported that “it is all connected, it is all interdependent.” (as cited in Ferreira, 2016, p. 1).

Strikingly, the overview effect does not only seem to affect the way the astronauts see the earth, but it also affects the way they perceive and experience it. The description of the fragile planet points to a possible inversion of the experience of the relationship between diminished self and vastness into the opposite. Once the astronauts shifted from the onlooker mode towards allowing to feel this relationship, a sense of rising care for this fragile planet evolved from a self that has abundant capacities. Astronaut Yuri Artyushkin, for example, summarized that “the feeling of unity is not simply an observation. With it comes a strong sense of compassion and concern for the state of our planet and the effect humans are having on it.” (Jaffee, 2011, p. 9). Especially important for our argument that the quality of self-experience informs the quality of action, however, is the notion by space tourist Anousheh Ansari, who suggested that the overview effect goes beyond experiencing, namely that “it sort of reduces things to a size that you think everything is manageable.” (Ferreira, 2016, p. 1). The one who experiences earth as a living being seems to grow in relation to it with a felt rise in capacity for action. This relates to a neurological understanding of compassion, which does not see it as an emotion only but also describes it as an activity (Singer & Bolz, 2013). Indeed, the overview effect has created lifelong changes in habits, including most of the astronauts becoming environmentalists. White explains: “My hypothesis was that being in space, you would see and know something experientially that we have been trying to understand intellectu-
ally for thousands of years.” (As cited in Ferreira, 2016, p. 1)

Guidance on what fueled the profound transformation of seeing oneself beyond intellectual understanding can be drawn from Yaden and colleagues (2016):

Images like Earthrise make that understand immediate and visceral, elevating it from something believed abstractly to something felt. The simultaneous complexity and fragility of our lives on Earth is no longer a mere concept, but a reality that can be understood personally. (Yaden et al., 2016, p. 1)

It seems that the effect of seeing oneself from the outside as part of something larger can shift anything. An interesting remaining question, however, explores how much of an impact the “effect of an in-person experience” (Yaden et al., 2016, p. 2) has if the image already creates a shift towards humanity seeing itself. Not just seeing a picture of the earth, but being able to sense a relationship led to an enlivening of the encountered other; in this case, earth. So does astronaut Yang Liu note: “I had another feeling that the earth is like a vibrant living thing. The vessels we’ve clearly seen on it looked like the blood and veins of human beings.” (as cited in Chen, 2012, p. 288).

Yaden and colleagues (2016) conclude that the astronauts “have felt overcome with emotion, have come to see themselves and their world differently, and have returned to Earth with a renewed sense of purpose.” (p.3). Importantly, although it seems that the experience of awe was involved in shifting the perception of self, others, and whole, it is probably not enough describe the quality of awareness with awe alone. Indeed, Yaden and colleagues (2016) suggests that the overview effect may have triggered “‘self-transcendent’ experiences (STE’s)” (p. 5), which they continue to define as “temporary feelings of unity characterized by reduced self-salience and increased feelings of connection” (cf. Yaden et al., 2016, p. 5). More precisely, people experience connection with other individuals, but also with humankind as a whole, and the “entirety of existence” (Yaden et al., 2016). These sensations of unity and connectedness find resonance on a neu-
rological level, as they were found to be associated with a lowered activity in neural regions related to spatial awareness, which might explain why the awareness of the self steps back for the sake of the larger whole (Newberg et al., 2001; Urgesi, Aglioti, Skrap, & Fabbro, 2010).

In summary, experiences like the overview effect have led to a shift in self-identification and behavior in at least some of the astronauts (Yaden et al., 2016). The effect seems to provide us with a more profound sense of knowing that cannot solely be attributed to awe. Still, the question of what it takes to close the knowledge-action gap (Scharmer, 2019) remains open. From a Theory U perspective, it seems that the astronauts’ first-person accounts point to how significantly the experience of self and social reality is altered by accessing deeper qualities of relating to the world. On a first level (and not presented in the overview effect above), the earth would be taken as a given. On a second level, the earth is seen as a concept from the outside (i.e., seeing earthrise as a picture). Third, empathetically relating to the earth allows knowing it from within. The earth is sensed as a relational percept in the form of a vibrant living being with vessels and veins. Finally, relating to earth on the source level, one knows her as an embodiment of humankind. Astronaut Paul Cernan experiences that “That’s humanity, love, feeling, and thought. You don’t see the barriers of color and religion and politics that divide this world.” (Yaden et al., 2016, p. 3).

Seeing, sensing, and presencing are relational categories capturing inner qualities of attending to the world and enacting different levels of action-ability. Deepening one’s awareness and capacity to relate to self, others, and the world in new ways make causes and effects collapse in time and space and, therefore, become actionable. Seeing oneself as diminished in contrast to the planet’s vastness may generate awe and pro-social behavioral tendencies, but it does not necessarily entail empathetic action. Sensing and empathizing with the earth (i.e., a heart-to-heart connection creating an appearance of fragility) adds a sense of urgency, potency, and response-ability but does not yet bring about a collective action ability that originates from the whole. Finally, Presencing the earth as a continually changing expres-
sion of a deeper source connects the viewer to the aliveness of a living being. The astronauts’ experiences suggest that the quality of how we attend to world matters for what we believe we can do.

Integrating the Three Empirical Cases and Concluding Remarks

The commonality of the three here-discussed cases is a change in the experience of the self in relation to others and whole due to a problem (i.e., threat), emotion (i.e., awe) or experience (i.e., overview effect), the “sublime” (Burke, 2015) changes. While this is elicited by the actual threat in the first case, it is driven by self-diminishment in the second and connectedness in the third. Although the three cases are undoubtedly different, they share that they all put one’s life into the perspective of eternity, which then affects attitude and action tendencies.

Similarly, one can detect the effect of a shift in awareness on action tendency in the COVID-19 case given at the outset of this chapter. While the tangible threat was certainly a driving force pushing change forward, another, less visible force was redirecting and specifying the effort. With the flattening of the curve approach soon becoming the most common strategy for freeing up health care systems worldwide (Baniamin, Rahman, & Hasan, 2020), societies – including the less vulnerable subgroups – silently agreed on prioritizing the well-being of the collective before individual goals. Doing so, we all seemed to see the pandemic from the perspective of the margins, which enabled us to pause habits for the sake of others. This deceleration came from a change in perspective to protect and take care of the common good (i.e., the health care system) and the vulnerable subgroups. In its most extreme cases, the outbreak of the virus, such as the Italian region of Lombardy (Barbaro, 2020; Giuffrida, 2020), the immense suffering accompanying it, as well as the dedication of health care and spiritual professionals, seemed to guide us through an evolution from mere survival towards a longing for civilization, and life in dignity. Although we were undoubtedly challenged to deal with the crisis in a humane way (cf. Daley,
2020), we seemed to find tools of coping with it that avoided the times of darkness and cruelty seen in prior pandemics (i.e., the Black Death; Cantor, 2001). We have taken a huge leap; that is, we allowed *interiority* (Gadamer, 1960) to develop.

More specifically, while the pandemic augmented our sensual and perceptive capacities, a more profound sense of shared reality was rising from the rubble. Tho Ha Vinh, former director of the Center for Gross National Happiness in Bhutan, identified the disillusionment of independence as a core aspect of a new unfolding, shifting reality:

The first one is the illusion of independence. For the first time in history, this crisis brings alive the experience of mutual interdependence as a reality affecting basically everyone around the globe. We have had crises much worse than this before in terms of death tolls, increase in poverty, and wars. But never before did a crunch affect literally everyone around the globe at once. Before, we always could have the impression it was not about us. It was out there in China, or Europe, or in a specific sector or with certain people. You could empathize and even help. But today, whoever and wherever you are, you are part of it as it happens. You get a sense of being part of a family that may be dysfunctional at times, but still is family, and whatever happens to one member anywhere in the world has an impact on everyone else and the whole. It is neither theoretical nor a philosophical perspective, it has become a reality. We finally get a shared first-hand experience of what it means that co-dependence is the foundation of our existence. Future development of society needs to consciously build itself on the principle of mutual dependence. (Ha Vinh, 2020)

Ha Vinh’s (2020) observations portray how a shift in the configuration of social fields may be experienced from a first-person perspective. Specific configurations of the social field, as presented in cell 4 in Figure 1, enable us to turn inwards, reveal our illusions and start facing the actual reality of the workings of our
social system from inside. They make us realize and attend to the true nature of our lives as humankind; that is, interdependence and impermanence. We discussed the three empiric cases to show how a change in perception of self, others, and the larger whole might affect attitudes and, eventually, behavior. However, the underlying mechanism has yet to be fleshed out in more detail to understand better what the social field is and how it may be constituted. This is what we will target in part 2. An example of how the configuration can be changed actively will be outlined in the third and final part.

Part II: The Configuration of Social Field and its Impact on the Ability to Act

In this part, we will specify the claim that the configuration of the social field determines the quality of the resulting action. To do so, we will first outline the scientific context of phenomenology, which will explain the direction of our interpretation of the social field concept in the subsequent review thereof. Next, we will discuss an understanding of social fields that acknowledges its origin in Gestalt psychology (Koffka, 1935; Köhler, 1925, 1967; Wertheimer, 1922, 1923, 1925), as well as its purpose to describe and change behavior (Lewin, 1943, 1951), and recent developments put forward by Theory U research (Scharmer, 2016; cf. Figure 1). Understanding that social fields can be characterized best by the underlying Gestalten (German plural form of Gestalt (figure, shape)), which are composed of the dynamic experience of time and space, we will then describe these two dimensions. Finally, we will close this part by briefly portraying the single fields.

Shapes as a Configuring Dynamic Component of the Social Field

Awareness-based social field research (Scharmer, Pomeroy, & Kaufer, in prep.) predicates that to shed light on how individual experiences relate to behavioral outcomes, research needs to turn inwards to the phenomenological investigation of the experience from a first- and second-person perspective. In line with
Pfuetze and Niebuhr’s (1954) perception that “an increasing number of first-rate thinkers are confronting us with the proposition that man’s essence is not to be found in isolated individuals, but in his bonds with his generation and his society” (p.30), we argue that we cannot fully understand action-inducing phenomena without moving research attention from single objects to relationships and the awareness underlying it. In a similar vein, Martin Buber criticized Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler for taking a perspective that “considers man in his self-being, the other of whom does consider man’s relation, but regards them as impairing his real essence.”(Pfuetze & Niebuhr, 1954, p. 30). Even earlier, Mead (1934) called for a study of behavior that looks at relationships, environment, and consciousness. His suggestion was as follows:

To consider the conduct of the organism (…), and in particular ‘self-conscious intelligence’ within this conduct. This position implies organisms which are in relationships to environments, and environments that are in some sense determined by the selection of the sensitivity of the form of the organism. It is the sensitivity of the organism that determines what its environment shall be. (p.328).

Mead (1934) argued that consciousness “is not simply an emergent at a certain point, but a set of characters that is dependent upon the relationship of a thing to an organism” (p. 329). He understood consciousness to represent “a certain sort of an environment in its relation to sensitive organisms.” (p. 329). Consequently, “anything that as a whole is more than the mere form of its parts, has a nature that belongs to it that is not to be found in the elements out of which it is made.” (p.329). In its core, this understanding postulated a nature inhere in the whole that is not explained by its parts.

From a phenomenological first-person perspective (Varela, 2002, 2009), the shift observed in all the three above-described phenomena may be due to a redirection of attention, for which Husserl has coined the term *epochè* (Scharmer, 2000) encompass-
ing three subsequent inner activities, which are suspending, redirecting, and letting go. Using micro-phenomenological methods (Petitmengin, Remillieux, & Valenzuela-Moguillansky, 2019), researchers have explored the inner unfolding experience of the redirection process in multiple activities and settings comprehensively.

Theory U adapted these methods. It assumes that moving from seeing to sensing implies an inner movement of redirecting attention by letting go of one’s thinking and stepping into the shoes of the other (Scharmer, 2009). While this first redirection from Field 2 to 3 leads to sensing the world from the perspective of the other, a second redirection happens when moving from Field 3 to 4 on the level of the collective, such that the entirety of the collective field sees itself from the perspective of its larger context.

If we apply such an approach to the empirical cases documented above, we can at least partially explain the shift of self-experience in light of the larger whole in the awe project (Piff et al., 2015) with a suspension of one’s concepts and concerns. Likewise, in the case of the overview effect, we can interpret the inner action of emptying oneself of habitual thought as the driving mechanism that brings another layer of reality into sight, which cannot necessarily be reduced to perceptual vastness (cf. Yaden et al., 2016). Indeed, Yaden and colleagues (2016) point to the fact that unlike other objects (i.e., the Grand Canyon), the “planet has an incredibly rich and broad context of meanings when viewed from above. The wholeness of the Earth makes it a symbol of almost all that is meaningful in human life.” (p. 4). It seems to be physical disconnecting combined with emotional connecting that “conjures thoughts of home, of the entirety of one’s world and of mankind as a whole” (Yaden et al. 2016, p. 4).

In summary, to understand a phenomenon, including the empty spaces between isolated phenomena, it seems necessary to deepen the research towards interior conditions of experience. This implies that in order to get a more researchable understanding of social fields, we need to move beyond what third-person research leaves uncovered by shifting attention from single individuals to the in-between, relational, and interior space. Under-
lying this argument, we assume that the “nature” (Mead, 1934, p. 329) of relationships themselves (i.e., being part of the whole, but not explained by the properties of the parts) residing in the in-between space has an impact on the quality of the whole. Whereas it does not matter now whether this nature is called configurations, patterns, or shapes, it is essential to recognize that they do not refer to the form of the visible individuals or objects but the shapes emerging from the in-between configurative space. Before we continue to describe the importance of these shapes for social fields, we will briefly review the origin of the social fields term with an emphasis on why the Gestalt-construct is essential for understanding and, finally, using it.

The Social Field

The understanding of the social field term is broad. Among the first using them, Lewin (1943) attempted to map out spatial relationships with the formula B = f(P, E), implying that behavior (B) is a function of the acting person (P) and their environment (E). Based on his understanding of a field as “the totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent” (Lewin, 1951, p. 240), a social field means the interpersonal context including all psychological forces (i.e., perception, cognition, affect) that, in total, lead a Person P or a Party P to behave in a particular manner. Consequently, if one were to alternate a specific behavioral outcome, one would have to identify the relevant psychological forces that resulted in that behavior. Once identified, these psychological forces would then be strengthened or weakened to change an undesired behavior towards a more desirable behavioral outcome.

Whereas the conceptualization of behavior as a result of person-environment interaction, and the understanding of behavior change as the result of an altered person-environment interaction, was fundamental for conceptualizing behavior (cf. Reeve, 2008), the characteristics of a social field remained to be specified. The fact that Lewin (1943) assumed that “any behavior or any other change in a psychological field depends only upon the
psychological field at that time” (p.294) suggests that he also expected that the interaction of person and environment would entail more than just that; namely at least a temporal component.

Indeed, Burnes and Cooke (2012) locate one of the reasons why Lewin’s (1943) exceptional fieldwork had in the aftermath not always received full attention is because of his attempt to validate a Gestalt-based (Koffka, 1935; Köhler, 1925, 1967; Ref Wertheimer, 1922, 1923, 1925) idea with mathematical rigor. They argue that this effort to justify the primarily Gestalt-originated theory mathematically did not only fell short in satisfying mathematical requirements for proof but also did not fully satisfy Lewin’s drive to enliven change as “a participative process and learning process” (Burnes & Cooke, 2012, p. 421; cf. Burnes, 2004). Consequently, there are at least two lines of research that, however, seem to not fully capture Lewin’s (1951) original emphasis on, first, the “totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent” (p. 240); that is, the factors that create the in-between field, and, second, its effect on actual behavior. On the one hand, some scholars primarily took up the mathematical conceptualization of a field that then remained empty of the field quality in a Gestalt sense (e.g., Helbing, 1994). On the other hand, a more sociological use (e.g., Power, 1999) has helped to research subgroup relationships (e.g., McLeod, 2005) but its use has been so closely intertwined to the term systems that its characteristics (especially in the original Gestalt sense) remained unclear (cf. Wilkinson, 1970).

Drawing from Lewin’s (1941, 1953) original work and the Gestalt tradition, Scharmer (2016) recently differentiated the social field from social systems in terms of perspective. Social fields emphasize the turn inwards to the lived experience of the acting person. Awareness-based social field research additionally points to the necessity that observing one’s experience requires awareness capacity. By arguing that “social fields are social systems – but seen also from within” (Schamer, 2019, p. 1), Theory U aims to unravel a level of awareness driving the experience of mutual interdependence that one remained unaware of in Lewin’s (1941, 1953) original work. As such, Scharmer, Pomeroy, and
Kaufer (in prep.) suggest that these fields compose the “source conditions” (p. 3) that guide the way we think, talk, and behave.

In an attempt to further conceptualize the social field, Scharmer (2017) describes 19 characteristics that he claims to be determining the quality of a social field. We believe that especially one of them – the idea that the quality of the social field is determined by one’s awareness of time and space – is crucial for understanding how the social field determines the quality of action. We choose to focus on time as the vertical and space as the horizontal axis because they seem to set the stage for four different types of experiencing the world. Next, we will specify this awareness-experience-based understanding of the social field by going back to field theory’s origin in Gestalt psychology.

The Gestalt of Social Fields

From the perspective of Gestalt psychology, social fields can be seen as Gestalten. Gestalten can be defined as “coherent wholes that have their own laws and are co-created by individual minds as reality” (Richter, 2010, p. 113). Key is the understanding of structure, which has originally been introduced by Dilthey (1894) as a feature of the whole. The whole can be seen as a particular configuration of its parts including the unity, which is organized by the proportional relationships between all of them. Building on the notion of Gestalt, our first take on the nature of social fields is to view them as schemes (Kohls & Scheiter, 2008) connecting mental (i.e., awareness), social (i.e., quality of relationships), and body-sensual (i.e., perceptions) facts of varied texture and developmental stages towards a composition that makes social reality come alive from within. As such, we suggest defining social fields as a combination of form and activity. By form, we imply social fields are environments hosting awareness about inter-relational interdependence. By activity, we mean the degree to which an active quality of vitality is present (i.e., connection to or absence from the source).

Undoubtedly, this proposition calls for more theoretical, controversial, and empirical backing in the future. However, we want
to advance this idea to reset the focus of discussion back to Lewin’s (1941, 1953) original grounding of field theory in Gestalt psychology, as well as his drive to predict tangible behavioral outcomes and the change thereof.

Scharmer’s (2016) Matrix of Inversion of Space, Time, Self, Collective, and Earth (see Figure 2 (adapted with permission from Scharmer, 2016, p. 238)) gives an overview of the main parameters driving distinct compositions of each social field. Moving down the table shows how increasing awareness of social space and time play out on what Scharmer and Kaufer (2013) call the three divides (Self, Collective, Earth columns on the right). From top to bottom, the experience of social reality dematerializes and reconnects self, other, and earth through the heart (i.e., Field 3) and, finally, through mere presence (Field 4).

![Figure 2](image)

We understand Gestalten as the living essence of social fields. The nature and quality of inner activity generate “social soil” (Scharmer, 2018, p. 15). The vitality of intermediary micro-activities (such as moments of suspension, redirection, letting go) connect self, other, and whole (Versteegen, 2019) and thus cultivate a force that is either coherent with or dysfunctional for action. The work of the Social Presencing Theater research group (Dutra, 2019; Hayashi, 2017) is an example of the exploration of the pattern language underlying embodied group sculptures moving from stuck to unstuck.

Still, more research is required to identify further the quality
of experience of inter-relational field shapes on a granular level; that is, the level of detail needed to depict the specific substance of the respective composition (cf., Petitmengin et al., 2019). For the moment being, however, we suggest to deepen our understanding of social fields by specifying the two dimensions suggested by Scharmer (2017) and that, from our perspective, represent the backbones opening up the social field.

The Two Axes of the Social Field.

Following Theory U’s approach, building the capacity to bring oneself into the present moment intentionally is fundamental (Goldman-Schuyler, Skjei, Sanzgiri, & Koskela, 2017). It is argued that the capacity to be aware of what is going on in one’s mind, other people, and the environment is determinative for the above-discussed emergent Gestalt of the social field. If we aim to change towards a certain configuration, we need to become competent master observers of our experience (Scharmer, 2000; Petitmengin et al., 2019).
As mentioned above, we understand the configuration (i.e., the *Gestalt*) of any social field to be determined by two axes (see Figure 3 (Matrix of awareness-based action; adapted with permission from Scharmer, 2016, p. 242; cf. Scharmer, 2017)). The first, horizontal axis expresses the degree of social space between self and other or, as Scharmer (2017) puts it, "the split between self and other – that is, the degree of disconnect between actors in a social system“ (p. 1). The second, vertical axis captures the social time in terms of absence and presence of source or, in Scharmer’s (2017) words, the “body-mind split of the collective – that is, the degree of disconnect between collective action and awareness“ (p. 1). Although any action certainly manifests under various conditions and in diverse forms, we argue that the nature of resulting action is determined by how time and space are experienced as a reality.

According to Scharmer (2016), the experience of reality is being modulated by three inner organs of perception, which are an open mind, open heart, and open will. By opening the mind, the experienced reality shifts from projection to an independent reality in the physical sphere perceived outside of ourselves (i.e., Field 2). Next, opening our heart connects us to the inner reality of seeing and feeling from the perspective of the other (i.e., Field 3). By putting ourselves into the shoes of the other, we redirect our attention on the horizontal axis to a co-sensing of social space. The experience of separateness (i.e., Field 2) gives way to a shared reality (i.e., Field 3). Social reality arises as a rhythmic movement of relational interconnectedness, not as a disconnected assembly of isolated things. Relating from the heart turns an object into a subject. Finally, opening the will connects us to the reality of wholeness and authentic action (i.e., Field 4). Redirecting the perspective from the parts to the whole and from passed time to timelessness creates a time-space experience of co-creation.

The vertical axis describes a collective body and mind. From bottom to top, it represents the experience of time from disembodied time to *Kairos* or, put differently, running time to timelessness. Time arises in our experience when we look at social reality from the perspective of its results, such as an old institution that is the manifest result of an idea invented 100 years ago. By looking at it
from the outside, it appears static and dead. We externalize the visible result of an idea as something separate from us. If we, in contrast, become able to process the emergence and evolution of the idea behind it as moments of movements (Oosterling, 2005), we experience timelessness. In the social reality of perceived timelessness, we are co-creators. In a social reality of the disembodied time, we are always late, facing the world as a finished result that we cannot participate in but become victims of.

The second, horizontal axis represents moving stages of self-other-awareness and corresponds to an opening of space moving from a manifest self to a manifest other. In moving from self to other, we are transitioning gradual shifts of inter-esse, which means the encounter with the “being” (esse) of the in-between (Oosterling 2005). Different stages of intersubjective experience have been researched from multiple perspectives (e.g., see Gallese, 2003, 2014, on the concept of intersubjectivity in neuroscience; see Depraz, 2001, 2012; Boulanger & Lancon, 2006, on intersubjectivity as alterology in genetic phenomenology; see Gunnlaugson, 2016, for an integral perspective; see Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Brewer & Chen, 2007, for a Social Identity Theory approach; see Buber, 1947, 1958; Friedman, 1999, for a philosophical and mystic perspective; and see Pfuetze & Niebuhr, 1954; Wilkinson, 1970, for a sociological account.)

Paradoxically, as people manage to enhance their social field quality, even complex challenges seem to get less tiring to deal with. When moving along the axes, shifting action gains speed and simplicity. As the experience of separateness mutes from Field 2 to 3 into a profoundly relational experience, Depraz (2001) suggests defining the newly emerging in-between-space as a “circular dynamic of relational mutuality” (p. 455) to capture the place between the poles of first and second person as a “plastic texture of exchanges (p. 454) rather than separate poles. Similarly, when dealing with the same paradox of how to bridge the apparent polarity on the level of the individual and the collective, Schmitz (2018) describes what could be seen as the emerging collective self in Field 4 as a plural subject:

(…) this neither creates a new subject as an additional
creature, nor a new subject as an additional creature, nor as a fusion of the members. The unity of the group is not the same kind of unity as the unity of an individual consciousness. It is a unity of minds, not of a mind. The collective subject is essentially a plural subject. (p.158).

When both axes collapse, perception unfolds as a distributed movement at the periphery of the whole, and each actor becomes a sensing organ. Collective self-awareness is the holding body and recipient of primary knowing. Rosch contends “that knowing capacity actually is the field knowing itself, in a sense, or this larger context knowing itself.” She continues to explain that ”when that happens, or when you get even a glimpse of it, you realize that we do not actually act as fragmented selves the way we think we do.” (Rosch & Scharmer, 1999, p. 1; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 2016).

To summarize, the quality of time-space-awareness determines the degree to which we feel embodied and at home with ourselves, each other, and earth, and consequently whether we perceive the world as a friendly or hostile place. The experience of separateness (i.e., Fields 1 and 2) can be inversed by turning inwards, moving from cognizing the world as external objects to sensually experiencing it as a living movement. The essential nature of the whole expresses itself in the interaction of its parts in the in-between space. Looking for a stable world of independence, permanence, and controllability outside of oneself may be convenient but turns out to be misleading and sustains actions that contribute to fragmentation. In contrast, redirecting our attention towards our inner shared world of creativity and connectedness strengthens the sources of our collective ability to be part of the next evolutionary steps of humanity. With social fields, we have at hand a new way of understanding ourselves. They help us to see the conditions it takes to create a container for self-sustenance and well-being for all from within. Having developed our understanding of how time and space configure the conditions of connect and disconnect in our lived experience, opening up four different qualities of social fields, we will now continue by portraying those four resulting fields.
The Four Qualities of Social Fields

Quality of Action Field – Gestalt 1. One-dimensional field awareness (I-in-me; Scharmer, 2016) results in a quality of action in which one solves known problems individually. One moves along daily routines in existing infrastructures and institutional bodies. Actions on this level may reinforce self-absorbance as they feed the illusion of safety, controllability, independence, and continuity. Among the common mindsets, we assume that we need to earn more money and become more important to be able to sustain the status quo and to satisfy our need for a safe life. Although all of these are natural human features that some part of us always longs for (Maslow, 1943, 1954), this field configuration paradoxically disconnects us from ourselves. The longer we stay in this field, we dwell in our bubble and disconnect from others. Similarly, our understanding that we can do it all by ourselves seems to gradually turn into the experience that we have to do it all by ourselves. We constantly assume that we need to plan better and work harder. We start to over-extend, disembody, and compensate for the increasing disconnect from ourselves by looking for safety, continuity, and controllability in the external world (Kruglanski et al., 2018; see Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017, for an example how perceived uncertainty affects decisions towards others). However, as we are opening the window and start looking outside, we do not necessarily like what we are seeing, which is an estranged world of people trying to gain money, safety, and predictability, and an economy promising exactly that – mirroring our mindset, but not becoming aware of it.

Quality of Action Field – Gestalt 2. The quality created by a two-dimensional field awareness (I-in-it) arises out of the social divide of me being different from you, and the realization that we compete with each other for scarce resources (Sherif, 1967). We identify with the groups we belong to (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reich, & Wetherell, 1987). As our group identity guides the way we see, hear, observe, and question the other (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, cf. Hornsey, 2008, for an overview), we increasingly become more aware of our rational self being distinct from the other. To give meaning to the situation, we need to make assumptions
about the other, which, in turn, may re-enforce our self-identification with our view (Turner et al., 1987). As a group, we may compete or cooperate, but as we identify with ethnic backgrounds, family, profession, department, organization, or nation, there is always space left between us and the other. We are aware that the other is spatially outside and distinct from us. Meanwhile, time is flowing.

Some of the actions from Field 2 are driven by the understanding that some of the more complex challenges outside of us cannot be solved alone. Thus, we perceive the other as a resource satisfying our needs (Maslow, 1954), whom we pay to maintain the illusion of independence. As we may not trust the other, we need to make contracts, time plans, and milestones to give each other controlled outward-oriented stability. Still, in case of doubt, any action will serve our group’s goals. In case of conflict, we will fight. Cooperative action, in contrast, will arise from the rational understanding that it could be useful or even necessary to cooperate. Our joint action will then be a function of what we perceive to be a balance of giving and receiving, with both of us aiming to get the most out of it. Nevertheless, we remain disconnected because of a lack of trust, and because we constantly remain and function as members of different subgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986)

Quality of Action Field – Gestalt 3. A 3-dimensional (I-in-you) relational space spans up the quality in Field 3. The other and we are two sides of a coin that has inversed, such that we are both aware of each other, but even more of the connection between us. This in-between space has emerged from the warmth of your otherness that we allowed ourselves to be touched by. Seeing what you feel from standing in your shoes reveals the reality you are living in behind the mask of different opinions and backgrounds. Receiving the gifts of your words and giving you my listening, we start to breathe together and reconnect to a part of us that we were not aware of. Whereas your otherness has been disturbing in Field 2, perhaps making us feeling diminished and helpless, we start sensing from our heart in Field 3. As we redirect our attention, we start sensing reality from the perspective of the impact our and others’ actions have had on each of us. At first, it
feels somewhat messy and clumsy to work through social reality as it is emerging anew through me experiencing your experience. However, when we stay with the old reality cracking up long enough, cause and effect will slowly turn round and present themselves in reverse order. Being in your shoes, one experiences oneself as seen from the results one’s actions may have had on the other.

The inner activity of bending our concern from self to others is a grounding and enlivening experience. Paradoxically, shifting perspective from self to other and moving awareness upstream from the results of an action to its origin seems to be sharpening our sense of embodiment. The conditions in Field 3 are such that we all can hold onto staying connected to ourselves as well as face what our unskillful actions may have created for each other without blaming each other.

Reconnecting to that deeper territory enlivens us. Sensing the presence of each other and holding onto it, a little seed is growing in the in-between space. That what becomes present tells us that we are just alike; we both want to be happy and safe (cf. Pyszczynski et al., 2012). With that realization, gratitude arises and spreads in the space surrounding us. There is an emerging sense of a surrounding sphere characterized by understanding, trust, and caring. It is the reconnection of self and other that enables joint action. We start abiding by what needs us no matter what it takes.

Quality of Action Field – Gestalt 4. Finally, collective presence-in-action arises from a four-dimensional space (I-in-now) of stillness. It emerges from a 360° sense of panoramic seeing. We all see and sense what everyone sees and senses and how we are part of it. Slowing down, we attend to what is unfolding continuously. The individual awareness of each of us acts as the extended sensing organ of the not-yet-embodied whole unfolding moment to moment. We are part of one center of knowing while each of us is simultaneously functioning as a peripheral self that constitutes a common boundary holding this consciousness. To illustrate, in a mountain landscape, we would simultaneously be the deep lake in the center of surrounding mountaintops and the surrounding mountains framing that scenery. As such, we can not only see the
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mountain tops being reflected in us as the lake, but our collective consciousness also creates the surface reflecting back. It is thus not about the mountains or the lake but the experience of the interplay between the embedding mountains and the embedded lake, which gives us a sense of who we are. The unfolding moment is full of potentiality and co-creativity arising.

The quality of action in Field 4 is characterized by collective awareness becoming a shared social reality. We gain a panoramic sense of wholeness by seeing ourselves in view of the effects we have been co-creating. The wholeness coming into appearance may be a glimpse, skewed, cracking, or dysfunctional, but it is profoundly felt to be ours. This enables us to give meaning to a not-yet-embodied possibility that has always belonged to us, but that needed us to connect to the being of the whole to be revealed. Cause and effect, knowing and doing, collapse in time and space. As we connect the dots arising from single-minded to collective awareness, we can catch ourselves in action. Everything is. We all have a profound sense of ourselves as much as of the whole. It is hard to even think about it, and as we do, we feel the unity cracking. Selves are connected to themselves and aware of themselves as part of a distributed being of interdependence. Our individual minds and the collective mind have stilled, and may not even be two. Primary knowing comes through the field; the field knows itself and directs action (Rosch, 1997; Scharmer, 2001). We, as a distributed sensing organ, represent the whole of humankind as a living being. There is a sense of awe and wonder. As a collective body, we share mind, heart, and will, and we are aware of it. Like any being, it has temperament, vitality, rhythm, and creativity. It is truth. It is beauty. It is life itself. The Field 4 Gestalt is a profound aesthetic experience. Being, knowing, and doing are one. When collective presence becomes a social reality, anything is possible. The action arising from this social reality is effortless and playful. Making ourselves available, we are connected to ourselves, other, and source.
Conclusion

In part 1, we reported three empirical cases that show how a shift in one’s experience of the relationship between self, other, and whole may alter the attitudes one has about others (Pyszczynski et al., 2012), the way one behaves (Piff et al., 2015), or the foundation on which one is able to act (Yaden et al., 2016). Besides, we have used the example of the COVID-19 pandemic to portray how the quality of action changes due to a change in perception.

We did so because an awareness-based social fields research approach suggests that to encourage transformation, one has to shift the focus point of attention. Instead of investigating attitudinal and behavioral change in terms of isolated constructs, we have to explore the relational qualities underlying them, aiming to make the source conditions of the coherent wholes available.

Still, we argue that both approaches offer the opportunity to understand the experience of self, other, and whole, and the resulting ability for action. From a methodological perspective, social fields can be seen as operational concepts representing explicit, tacit, and self-transcending levels of knowing (Scharmer, 2001). They describe the what (level of action; e.g., listening, speaking, organizing), the how (e.g., embodiments of time-space-experience), and the source (source; i.e., quality of awareness) that leads to behavior. From a practitioner perspective, social fields are change tools like co-created environments (i.e., “social soils,” Scharmer, 2018, p. 15), which increasingly allow actors to create a space of resonance for seeing themselves not only as individuals but as an acting whole from the outside.

Assuming that the purpose of awareness-based social field research is to understand how the quality of awareness guides action and that the drive of practitioners is to change action through awareness, we have to understand overview effect-like phenomena and how to evoke them practically. Put simply, although the overview effect (as well as the COVID-19 pandemic) seem to be excellent conditions for revealing both potentials of beauty (i.e., presencing) and destruction (absencing; Scharmer, 2016), we acknowledge the necessity for more straightforward,
grounded tools to enable a shift in social field quality. Thankfully, our experience tells that certain U-related practices and processes are able to activate such an awareness of something larger than the self, similar to the overview effect. Before that, however, it is important to examine the assumption that the leverage to the agency of change is not so much in the individual shift at first but in the inter-relational activity shifting awareness towards interbeing, which may create active forces of its own. By attending to self, other, and whole, they earn this kind of knowing, and by further cultivating those relationships, this intermediary space assumes existence independent from a single individual.

While the first two empirical cases, common threat and awe, are similar to the third, the overview effect, in the way that they all incorporated an altered awareness of being part of something larger than the self, they are still qualitatively different from the third. In the latter, people wake up to the deeper conditions of what it means to be human. We understand this as the final shift to a Gestalt 4 kind of field, which then enables a powerful transformative force. While the two former cases created the shift in a lab by the manipulations of an experimenter, Theory U practitioners seek to alternate these field conditions for human beings to become aware of their co-creative power and make free choices that serve the well-being of the whole better.

Whereas it is important to recognize that this drive to guide and change behavior is where we close circles with Lewin’s original work (Lewin, 1941), practitioners in the Theory U tradition attempt to enable groups of multiple stakeholders to act across systems embodying human wholes or humanity per se. We do not do this because we aim to explain most of the behavioral outcome variance but to serve the deeper development and understanding of what it means to be human. As the term development suggests that there is no end to this, we understand the here-proposed advancement of the social fields terminology as a step towards understanding how an action is created and, eventually, changed. Thus, we will close this chapter by not only sharing a hands-on Theory U practice but also some questions for future research that we consider helpful in developing the quality of the social field.
Part III: Outlook

In the final part, we will first give a practical example of Theory U practice to show how awareness and action can be integrated towards a shift in social field experience. Secondly, we will share some suggestions for future research based on what has been developed in this chapter.

A Practical Example Integrating Awareness and Action

To recall, we suggested that the Gestalten of social fields shift as reconfigurations of self, other, and whole relationships unfolding within each and among the three. Each palpable configuration of relational connections across the three is a function of the combination of an inner, invisible awareness-based activity combined with an outer, visible action in the social world. The context of the following example is a 1-year-program in “Gross National Happiness: From Inner Transformation to Social Innovation” that one of us teaches with Tho Ha Vinh, (Eurasia Learning Institute for Happiness and Wellbeing, ELI13) and Jacoba Harm (Presencing Institute/Eurasia Learning Institute) at the Hochschule of Applied Sciences14 in Osnabrück, Germany. The president of the university, Andreas Bertram, and Christiane Leiste, director of the university-based mindfulness leadership program, host respectively co-teach the program. The program entails four 3.5 day-long modules spread over ten months, peer coaching pairs meeting weekly to biweekly between the modules, as well as case clinic groups meeting in monthly sessions. The purpose of the program is to bring together inner transformation with outer social innovation. It provides a quality space for transformative leadership learning for 40 participants from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, including all sectors of society.

Conceptual, experiential, group, and individual learning during the program are based on building capacity for U-Processes in the context of social change along the four pillars of Gross National Happiness (GNH; Ha Vinh, 2019). Throughout the program, participants develop a process for GNH projects in their contexts. The program asks participants to have or start building a contemplative practice as a regular part of their lives. The program is designed to experience living in harmony with
self, others, and whole. This includes contemplative practices in the mornings and at night, a rhythmic organization of the days including a 1.5-hour break at lunchtime, body and arts practices, sessions of social-emotional learning (cf. Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics, 2017), as well as expert teachings, and learning from each other.

In detail, this example refers to a *sensing journey* (Scharmer, 2009) undertaken in the first module. Our understanding of sensing as combining inner and outer activity is to deepen and widen our perception to re-connect parts and whole, as well as to make sense of the experience individually and collectively. Sensing means to deepen the perception by feeling into the phenomena we are dealing with, such that they become almost enlivened. *After deepening* the perceptual experience, we need to *broaden* it (Tho Ha Vinh, personal communication, April 27, 2020). We need to make sense of the experience individually and collectively by putting it into a larger context. Hence, sensing journeys mean to step back and forth between breathing in sensing experience (i.e., focused attention) and breathing out a quote (i.e., open awareness) repeatedly to share experiences and get into collective sense-making.

Specifically, participants gathered in subgroups and went to visit living examples of organizations, communities, and initiatives in the area that are trying to innovate around the ecological, social, and spiritual divides in agriculture, ecology, communities, special education, and health care. They were asked to interview the stakeholders involved and to collect key quotes of their most important sensings. When back to the program site, we first deepened co-sensing across journeys in small groups. We ended the session with a small *Jazz Combo* (Scharmer, 2000), reading quotes to each other, everyone standing up (no circle). We instructed participants to read a quote, to pause, to listen to the silence, followed by the next person reading a quote, pausing, and so on. Participants kept playing their instruments but also listened to the emerging music among them (see Scharmer, 2000, for details).

By the way the quotes were read, time slowed down and induced an expecting stillness, which then opened a new space of peripheral listening towards the quotes as unfolding footsteps of
a larger, invisible movement (cf. Scharmer, 2000). As each partic-
pipant did not only listen attentively to their own quote but also to
the ones of others, an emerging narrative was embodied by the
group before it could be named as an abstraction.

Listening to this reality emerging from amidst the quotes is a
profound act of community creation. Participants slow down,
attend to the emerging whole, and their authentic voice in it. The
experience of time starts inversing, such that one becomes part of
a collective co-creation. Every quote is a sculptural detail of some
aspect of the essence of the whole, as experienced by the person
who is quoting it. By voicing authentic individual sense experi-
ence quote by quote, patterns of collective experience move
through all of them and become alive as the living forces forming
the Gestalt of the emerging whole. As the whole starts to get a
hold in the community, the time-space-configuration is shifting,
and with it comes a new sense of reality and understanding.

Critically, as this happened on the first module’s first day of
the program, nobody knew anyone else. The shared experience
of sensing the whole created a tight bond amongst participants,
though not knowing each other. Some would tell us at the end of
the second module that they still had not met every single co-part-
ticipant but felt comfortable and safe. Approximately 25% of the
participants came from the Osnabrück region. Some shared with
us how profoundly this experience had changed their perspec-
tive on their home base. They had started to see the well-known
with new eyes. Conversely, non-locals observed that the place
moved from feeling strange to feeling familiar.

In summary, our takeaway from this example is that cultivat-
ing sensing as an inner dual activity of breathing in sensory per-
ception and breathing out sense-making refraes the configuration
of part and whole, as well as self and other in space and time.
This example makes it possible to see how the lens of experience
elicits how a Gestalt as a configuration of hidden relationships
metamorphoses across the four fields.

In the Field 1 Gestalt, we are undifferentiated unities, such
that everybody brings their ideas about the region of Osnabrück.
In the Field 2 Gestalt, we are both parts of a non-existing unity,
such that we can differentiate between participants from Osna-
brück and those coming from outside. In the Field 3 Gestalt, we are both part of an inter-relational being (Buber, 1958) and start becoming aware of a shared social body. Finally, in the Field 4 Gestalt, we, co-enacting the region by our quotes, start to see the region as a living being. Our authentic quotes become the mirror cells of the collective mind becoming aware of and seeing itself. Mirroring our collective self, we may come to see that it is not only us in need of the earth. In contrast, we may see the reverse, namely that the earth is a living being with a biography of its own in need of us to make its next evolutionary step.

Questions for Future Research

This chapter attempted to describe the social fields concept in more detail. Specifically, we discussed social fields in relation to the matrix of awareness-based action (Scharmer, 2016) and the quality of each social field. Although understanding each of these concepts certainly deserves more attention in future research, we deem it necessary to study how the single concepts are related, and, more importantly, distinct from each other. A key part of this line of research would be to disentangle the components within awareness-based social fields research that requires an integrated perspective (i.e., that need to be explored in relationship to understand the full quality of the concept under discussion), and which components can be differentiated from each other. Whereas it would, for instance, have little meaning to examine the two dimensions self-other and body-mind within the matrix of awareness-based action (Scharmer, 2016) in isolation from each other, it could be worthwhile to organize the distinctiveness of overarching concepts more clearly.

A first project would establish a comprehensive list of all concepts under discussion (e.g., social fields, the matrix of awareness-based action, social reality, three divides), and explore potential content overlap thereof. The aim of this is to get a clear impression of the constructs needed to understand behavior change and to streamline their use a bit more.

Another project would then attempt to explore the temporal
and spatial positions of the single constructs. Again, the goal of this approach would not be to isolate the constructs. However, if we are keen enough to postulate a clear sequential order by claiming that action follows awareness (cf. Scharmer, 2016), then we should also try to maintain this clarity within our constructs. Right now, for example, we would speculate that the matrix of awareness-based action (Scharmer, 2016, p. 242; cf. Figure 1) is what opens up the social fields. These social fields, in turn, make us experience the relationships between self and self, self and other, and self and nature as divided or healed. Finally, depending on whether we experience them as divided or healed, we become able to act (see Figure 4).

A third project could investigate the claimed relationships more rigorously. For example, it would be interesting to examine if the quality of the social field is indeed sufficiently described by the interaction of the two suggested dimensions. If this is the case, field experiments using four separate groups representing each dimensional expression should be able to predict the proposed quality of each field, respectively. Such a project would not only offer a better theoretical understanding but give clear suggestions for what U-practitioners have to alter when aiming for action change.

Conclusion

We opened this chapter with the COVID-19 pandemic to raise a practical example for the argument that the quality of action depends on the social field creating it. Using three empirical cases, we described additional content from which we could then derive an advanced understanding of the social field. Based on the origins of social field work in Gestalt psychology, as well as
more recent developments in awareness-based social field research, we suggested advancing our understanding of social fields as a Gestalt evolving from our experience of social time and social space. We closed the chapter with a practical example showing how the quality of a social field becomes apparent, as well as sharing some questions for future research; both revolving around the question of how collective action can be facilitated out of free consciousness when a pandemic is not at hand.

References


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Chapter 7 - Social Fields As An Awareness-Based Approach To Reconnect Self, Other, and Whole


Advances in Presencing


