

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Tracing the Heritage and Evolution of Gestalt Psychology in Morphologic Organisation Analysis

Introduction: From Gestalt thinking to organisational analysis

Gestalt psychology emerged in early 20th-century Germany as a counter-response to the reductionist, atomistic, and mechanistic models of perception and experience. Its core proposition, that psychological life is structured in dynamic, meaningful wholes, challenged dominant paradigms in both philosophy and psychology, emphasizing form, emergence, and relational context.

This conceptual legacy has since taken on diverse forms. One major development in the lineage of the Berlin *School of Gestalt theory* was *Morphological Psychology*, founded by Wilhelm Salber in Cologne during the 1960s. Building on *Gestalt principles*, Salber developed a comprehensive theory of psychic processes focused on transformation, symbolic dynamics, and contextual meaning. His work laid the foundation for a psychological approach to cultural and institutional analysis that deliberately departs from functionalist or mechanistic models. An essential transitional figure between classical Gestalt theory and applied social psychology was Kurt Lewin. As a former student of Wolfgang Köhler in Berlin, Lewin extended Gestalt thinking into the social realm, developing concepts such as *field theory*, *life space*, and *valences*. His pioneering work on *group dynamics and action research* laid the groundwork for participatory, process-oriented models of organisational change that continue to influence practice today. To situate this perspective further within the field of organisational psychology, we will also consider the work of Edgar Schein. While primarily associated with the Anglo-American tradition of Organisational Development, Schein draws from Gestalt-informed concepts, particularly those introduced by Kurt Lewin's field and learning theories. His layered model of organisational culture helps bridge *psychological, anthropological, and managerial approaches*. The structure of this paper follows this chronological and conceptual trajectory. We begin with Kurt Lewin's *field theory and action research*, highlighting his Gestalt-informed view of organisations as dynamic systems. We then examine Edgar Schein's cultural model, which operationalises many of these principles within organisational settings. Building on this, we turn to the morphological approach, tracing its *conceptual roots in Gestalt and depth psychology*. Finally, we illustrate how this framework is extended

in the *culture-psychological* research and consulting work of Herbert Fitzek, who has adapted Salber's theory into a methodology for organisational analysis and development.

It all starts with Lewin

Any serious inquiry into Gestalt-informed organisational analysis begins with Kurt Lewin. Trained as a Gestalt psychologist and widely recognized as a founder of modern *Organisational Development* (OD), Lewin holds a unique position at the intersection of theory and practice. His academic formation in Berlin anchored his conviction that psychological phenomena should be understood as *dynamic, structured wholes rather than as isolated elements* (Ash, 1998). This *Gestalt perspective* shaped his entire intellectual trajectory, even as he moved from perceptual theory to group psychology and, eventually, to organisational transformation.

Lewin's contributions laid the conceptual and methodological basis for OD while preserving Gestalt principles such as *tension, field structure, and systemic transformation* throughout his thinking. Until today his work remains central to any approach that seeks to understand organisations as *living, interdependent systems* rather than static, normative hierarchies (Fitzek, 2011b).

Early Gestalt psychology as theoretical grounding – the Berlin school

Kurt Lewin's psychological worldview was deeply shaped by *Gestalt theory*. Having studied under Carl Stumpf and collaborated with figures such as Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Köhler, he absorbed the *Gestalt principle* that mental life is organised in *structured, meaningful wholes*. Against atomistic models, Gestalt psychology emphasized that perception, emotion, and action arise from *dynamic configurations – Gestalten – that cannot be reduced to isolated elements* (Koffka, 1935/2013). This conceptual orientation remained central as Lewin turned his attention to *social and group processes*. Gestalt thinking instilled in him an enduring focus on form, structure, and relational tension, qualities that would later define his theories of group dynamics and organisational life. In his essay 'When Facing Danger', Lewin (1948, p. 165) famously wrote: "It is not the similarity or dissimilarity of individuals that constitutes a group, but interdependence of fate". The idea that *group identity emerges from internal relational dynamics* rather than individual traits can here be seen as a direct extension of Gestalt principles. Gestalt theory also informed Lewin's understanding of *process and transformation*. *A Gestalt is never static; it continuously forms, dissolves, and re-forms*. Lewin's enduring concern with change, whether in individuals, groups, or institutions, reflects this view. Long before applying his ideas to organisations, he was committed to a *model of psychological development driven by tension, polarity, and emergent structure* (Lewin, 1935). This orientation gained urgency following Lewin's emigration from Nazi

Germany in 1933. Leaving behind the academic context of Berlin, he shifted his focus toward the practical conditions of democratic life. In the United States, he became a key figure in applied social psychology, working on issues such as child-rearing, racial integration, and poverty (Ash, 1998). His efforts were driven by a belief in psychology's capacity to *foster participatory change and resist authoritarianism*. These commitments culminated in the methodological principle he later called action research, asserting that "*Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice*" (Lewin, 1946, p. 35).

Field theory: The social space

Lewin's work with educators, families, and marginalized communities led him to understand psychological processes as fundamentally embedded in lived social contexts (Lewin, 1946). He saw that behaviour cannot be isolated from the relationships, tensions, and norms shaping an individual's situation. While his later writings became less explicitly tied to Gestalt theory, core principles such as wholeness, dynamic configuration, and the mutual shaping of figure and ground remained central to his thinking. Through field theory, Lewin (1948) extended these ideas into the domain of social and behavioural systems, offering *a model in which individual and collective experience co-emerge*. At the heart of field theory is the notion that every action arises from a total psychological situation, termed the "*life space*" by Lewin (1936). This space encompasses not only physical surroundings but also subjective forces: emotional states, social expectations, values, and imagined futures. It is this dynamic configuration, not isolated variables, that shapes how a person perceives and acts. Lewin (1936, p. 12) expressed this systemic view in his functional equation: $B = f(P, E)$.

Behaviour (B) is a function of the person (P) and their environment (E). Importantly, "*environment*" refers not to external conditions in the objective sense, but to what is psychologically real for the person: what is perceived, anticipated, resisted, or internalized. This perspective would prove crucial in understanding behaviour within *shared symbolic and cultural constructed contexts*, such as those found in organisations.

Group dynamics as a psychological field

Building on field theory, Lewin extended his focus to the group as a psychological field in its own right. Groups, he argued, are not merely aggregates of individuals but structured totalities shaped by interdependent forces, shared norms, and patterns of mutual influence (Lewin, 1947, p. 8). He introduced the concept of *group dynamics* (see Lewin, 1948) to describe how behaviour arises not simply from individual traits, but from the internal tension systems operating within a shared social space. In a series of landmark experiments, Lewin

and his colleagues demonstrated how group climate, particularly leadership style and prevailing norms, could significantly shape behavioural outcomes (Lewin et al., 1939). Their studies with school-aged boys under *authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership* revealed that each setting produced distinct emotional tones, conflict patterns, and degrees of participation. Democratic leadership fostered cooperative and stable behaviour, whereas authoritarian conditions led to hostility and passivity. These findings reinforced Lewin's view that *group-level forces* such as atmosphere and structure are psychologically real and play a decisive role in *enabling or resisting change*. This perspective allowed Lewin to treat groups not merely as observable units but as dynamic psychological systems, marked by their own structures, tensions, and inertia. Drawing from Gestalt principles, he understood *group behaviour as an emergent phenomenon* shaped by the interplay of actions within an *interrelated whole*. Building on this insight, later cultural and holistic approaches to organisations viewed change not as isolated adjustment, but as a shift in the dynamic field of interrelated forces and shared sense-making.

Edgar Schein: From Gestalt legacy to the foundations of organisational development

Edgar H. Schein, one of the most influential figures in modern organisational theory, began his academic journey as a clinical psychologist with a strong interest in group processes and personality. Born in 1928 and educated at the University of Chicago and Harvard, he came of age intellectually during a period when *psychology, anthropology, and systems theory were beginning to merge into new forms of organisational inquiry*. In later reflections, he described himself as an “organisational clinician and process consultant,” shaped more by practical engagement than by laboratory abstraction (Schein, 2015, p. 2). In many respects, Schein extended the work of Kurt Lewin, exploring how social systems, norms, and shared meaning structures form the often invisible context of individual, group and organisational action. From the outset, Schein explicitly aligned himself within the Lewinian Gestalt traditions of applied psychology. He frequently acknowledged Lewin's foundational role in shaping change theory, writing: “I found Lewin's basic change model of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing to be a theoretical foundation upon which change theory could be built solidly” (Schein, 1996, p. 60). Yet, Schein expanded this foundation by developing a cultural and interpretive framework for organisational life. Where Lewin had referred to the environmental life space and psychological field, Schein introduced the concept of *Organisational Culture* as the deepest level of forces influencing the organisational system (Schein, 1985). These forces, once internalized, create an environment that is not merely contextual but an active force shaping how members of an organisation perceive, interpret, and behave.

Gestalt thinking played a subtler but nonetheless significant role in this framework. Schein acknowledged the Gestalt school's emphasis on *perception, field, and emergent structure*, and these sensibilities deeply influenced how he understood *organisational life* (see Schein, 1985, 1988, 1996). Rather than viewing organisations as stable entities governed by explicit rules or procedures, he approached them as *dynamic meaning systems*, where behaviour unfolds in relation to shifting, often implicit assumptions. Culture, in this view, functions not as a fixed structure but as an *evolving background of interpretation*, closely aligned with Gestalt principles such as *figure-ground dynamics and contextual perception*. This perspective also informed Schein's methodological stance. Over time, he increasingly valued observation, fieldwork, and case-based inquiry as essential to understanding the complex, lived realities of organisational life. He explicitly positioned himself towards a *qualitative descriptive psychology*, stating: "*I still think that good observation, phenomenology, fieldwork, ethnography, and careful case analyses are more important than quantitative statistical hypothesis testing*" (Schein, 2015, p. 3).

From action research to process consultation

Schein's practical contribution to the Lewinian Gestalt lineage of Organisational Development becomes clearest in his concept of *Process Consultation* (Schein, 1988) which he framed not merely as a consulting technique, but as a foundational *epistemology for organisational learning and diagnosis*. In this approach, the consultant does not enter the system as an expert armed with tools, but as a participant in a shared "*humble inquiry*" (Schein, 2016), an embedded observer who works with, not on, the organisation. This position reflects both Lewin's insistence on *participatory change* and Gestalt psychology's commitment to perception as *contextual and co-created*, which Schein (1988, p. 18) named "the most important precursor" to his own approach. He articulated this stance forcefully, writing that "*the processes of learning about a system and changing that system are, in fact, one and the same*" (Schein, 1996, p. 35). *Every intervention is already also a diagnosis, and every observation has potential to affect field forces*. This logic mirrors Lewin's action research and the Gestalt concept of *figure ground*: no element can be understood apart from the whole in which it appears. Organisational patterns, conflicts, and norms emerge not through detached analysis, but through engagement, dialogue, and *reflection in action*. Schein's rejection of the expert model is equally grounded in this perceptual logic. He, with explicit reference to Lewin, emphasized that consultants must access their 'ignorance' and "*let go of the expert or doctor role, and get attuned to the client system as much as possible*" (Schein, 1996, p. 34), a notion deeply resonant with the Gestalt commitment to bracketing assumptions and attending to emergent form. Help, in this framework, is not

delivered but discovered: “Process consultation is the foundational philosophy of organisational learning and development, based on the idea that *you can only help a human system to help itself*” (Schein, 2010, p. 19, trans.). Rather than striving for control or prediction, he described consultation as navigating “*emergent change*”, always adapting to the flow of the relationship and the cultural logic of the client system (Schein, 1988, p. 108). Even structured interventions must remain sensitive to latent signals and the deeper cultural assumptions that underlie observed behaviour. This again reflects the Gestalt principle that structure and process are inseparable: *insight is relational and transformative*.

From this angle, process consultation is not just a method for intervention but a culture theoretical stance. It recognizes that underlying organisational behaviour are deeply held, often unspoken assumptions - “*cultural DNA*,” as Schein (Schein, 1985) called it, must be surfaced before any sustainable transformation can occur. Lewinian Gestalt psychology’s influence is again evident in this approach to diagnosis: what matters is not just what is said and asked, but how it is perceived and made meaningful within the system (Schein, 2010, p. 65, trans). In his later reflections, Schein made this epistemological position more explicit, aligning change with learning: “*Change is better defined as learning [...] cultures change through enlarging and broadening, not through destruction of elements*” (Schein, 2015, p. 17). These assumptions, he emphasized, cannot simply be ‘changed’ in a linear fashion. Instead, consultants must work relationally, attending to the learner’s sense of safety, involvement, and readiness. This is not just an ethical stance but a methodological one: “If the client is to learn, the diagnostic process must itself be educational” (Schein, 2010, p. 135).

Here, we also see the link back to Lewin’s (1943, p. 118) original maxim that “nothing is as practical as a good theory” now framed in a broader context of field based, perceptual, and developmental sensitivity. In this sense, process consultation marks a decisive evolution of Gestalt grounded OD thinking, paving the way for newer, psychologically oriented approaches such as the *analysis of culture*, which continues this holistic legacy with its own emphasis on *emergent structure, interpretive depth, and field complexity* (see. Fitzek, 2011b; Schein et al., 2009).

Culture as a diagnostic structure

Building on Lewin’s field theory, Edgar Schein’s model of organisational culture (1985) offered a way to diagnose not only visible structures but the underlying psychological field that shapes action, perception, and meaning. In Gestalt terms, culture becomes the perceptual Gestalt of an organisation, a dynamic whole structured through tension, relevance, and background assumptions. Rather than seeking formal rules or static traits, Schein looked for the emergent pattern that gives shape to organisational life as a whole.

He proposed a three-level model of culture that aims to capture the versatile Gestalt of complex organisations:

1. Artifacts

Artifacts are the visible, audible, or tangible expressions of culture: dress codes, office layout, rituals, language, technologies, or shared stories. These are easy to observe but difficult to interpret without understanding the deeper context. As Schein (1985, p. 14) put it, they represent “the constructed physical and social environment”.

2. Espoused Values

These are the stated norms, strategies, or philosophies that an organisation claims to believe in. They can be found in mission statements, leadership rhetoric, or formal codes of conduct and company websites. But as Schein (1985, p. 20) notes: “they may or may not be congruent with behaviour and with underlying assumptions”. Espoused values can lead to unresolved contradictions or underlying tensions within the culture.

3. Basic Assumptions

At the deepest level lie the unconscious beliefs that are taken for granted: what people assume without question and live by mostly without conscious reflection. These assumptions are “*learned responses that have worked well enough to be taken for granted*” that tell members “*how to perceive, think and feel about things*” (Schein, 1985, p. 30). They form the psychological bedrock of organisational behaviour – for better or worse.

Schein’s model can be expressed in a simplified formula:

Organisational culture = [*Values : Artifacts* = *Basic Assumptions*]

This logic allows us to use tensions between surface and stated culture as a pathway to understand what is tacitly organising perception and action, often in contrast to (managerial) intention. In Gestalt terms, the contradiction itself becomes the figure that reveals the underlying ground.

A field example drawn from the authors’ own practice illustrates this interpretive frame:

During a guided tour of a heavy industry production plant, the organisation proudly displays its numerous environmental initiatives: certificates, green logistics, and public commitments to sustainability. These represent the *espoused values*. Yet at a moment of unscripted openness, we pass a small stream on the property littered with plastic waste and industrial debris. An *artifact* that sharply contradicts

the *green narrative*. When asked about it, the guides offer a revealing jest: “*We used to deposit much worse stuff here.*”, they respond with a shifty chuckle, leaving it unclear to us, and maybe even themselves, about the truth behind that statement. But it exposes a *basic assumption* operating beneath the surface: that ecological sensitivity is a historical *blind spot on the culture DNA* and that working and producing giant machinery is inevitable sometimes a *dirty business* that might contradict nature’s best interests. This cultural contradiction is not noise, it is psychological information. It allows the consultant to perceive a Gestalt of the organisation as it is *actually lived*, *not only as it is claimed*. In this sense, the diagnostic process becomes inseparable from the interpretive act. As Schein notes succinctly, “*Everything you do is an intervention*” (Schein et al., 2009, p. 16). Perceiving and naming what is already begins to reshape the cultural field forces. Schein’s model also allows us to go beyond the notion of culture as a monolithic system. Drawing on Lewin, this emphasizes that to change the equilibrium of a social field, one must attend to “the total social field, including the groups and *subgroups* involved, their relationships, and their value systems” (Lewin, 1947, p. 32). Organisations contain not a single culture, but overlapping and sometimes conflicting *subcultures*, each with their own logic, assumptions, and meaning structures. As summarized in the paraphrased formula:

Gestalts consist of Gestalts - the same holds true for culture(s) (see Schein et al., 2009, p. 179).

Subcultures are not deviations; they are field formations. They emerge in departments, professions, or leadership levels, and their interaction creates the actual perceptual and emotional field of the organisation. Understanding culture means diagnosing not a singular soul, but a structured complexity of shared and divergent meanings.

From field to formation: The morphological approach to culture analysis

The development of *Morphological Psychology* marks both a continuation and a fundamental reworking of the Gestalt tradition. Its founder, Wilhelm Salber, worked with Friedrich Sander, a central figure of the *Berlin School of Gestalt Psychology*. While Gestalt theory laid the groundwork for understanding perception as structured and meaningful, Salber extended these principles into the realms of art, *everyday life* (*Alltag*), learning, and influence, insisting that psychological formations must be grasped not only as structured wholes, but as *processes of formation*. Salber viewed Gestalt theory as a necessary starting point, but not a sufficient model for capturing the reality of psychic life. Crucially, he acknowledged Kurt Lewin as a transitional figure whose work had already pushed Gestalt beyond its perceptual origins. Lewin, in Salber’s reading, introduced a social-psychological dynamic that *combined field theory with psychoanalytic motifs*, especially in his early writings on inner conflict, need systems, and tension-based development (Salber,

2025, p. 258). The theory of *Handlungseinheiten*, ‘action units’ embedded in social contexts, provided a model for how psychological life could be both structured and relationally situated. Salber adopted and transformed this idea into his concept of *Wirkungseinheiten*, ‘impact units’ - dynamic psychological constellations that exert meaning and force within a lived experiential field. These *Wirkungseinheiten* can be understood by *figurations (Figurationen)*, *forces of psychic movement* and *symbolic pattern that unfold across time, often charged with internal contradiction, ambivalence, or rhythm*. Morphology thus became a psychology of formation and transformation (Gestalt und Verwandlung): not focused on content or behaviour alone, but on the structure of psychic process as it manifests in everyday life.

Still, Salber identified what he saw as the central limitation of traditional Gestalt theory: its lack of a true conceptualization of transformation. Gestalt theory described structure, but not *how structure changes*. What it lacked, Salber introduced by drawing on *Goethe’s (1790/2005) concept of Morphology as the study of forms in perpetual formation*. As he wrote:

“*Gestalt and transformation must always be viewed together*” (Salber, 1969/1981, p. 25).

With this, Salber reformulated psychological theory into a *morphology of experience*, where inner life is shaped by *emerging tensions, polarities, and symbolic development*, not fixed categories. This is no longer a psychology of perception alone, but of figurations, change, and psychic dramaturgy.

As summarized in his later reflections (Salber, 2025, p. 259), *morphological psychology emerges as a theory capturing movement and depth within the same framework, bridging structural form and dynamic transformation*.

Where traditional organisational psychology often isolates values, behaviours, or structures as objects of measurement, the morphological perspective is concerned with the symbolic shape of shared experience. It never regards organisations as a static system, but as a dynamic structure of tensions, symbolic positions, and transformational patterns that organise collective psychological life.

Gestalt versions: analysing organisations through morphological description

This morphological model of Gestalt analysis, developed by Wilhelm Salber and later refined in applied organisational research by Herbert Fitzek, offers a distinctive interpretive framework for Gestalt-rooted psychological organisational culture research. While Schein’s model has become a foundational diagnostic heuristic in OD, the morphological tradition emphasizes further that these ‘levels’ should be seen as symbolically charged stages in a *figural developmental process*, organised by subconsciously organised *psycho-aesthetic forms and structures* (see Biehl-Missal & Fitzek, 2014). Within the empirical fieldwork phase, the *four-step*

morphological versions of Gestalt description ('Versionengang') evolve in an iterative manner, narrowing, widening, and refining the organisation and its fluctuating form. This process moves from early sketches and images to figurative structures and subconscious collective patterns.

Fitzek (2007, 2008, 2014, p. 19) pointed out parallels between the morphological four-step interpretive structure and Schein's three levels of organisational culture. In the *Morphological versions*, the aim is not merely to classify cultural data, but to *reconstruct a culture as a Wirkungseinheit*, a holistic unit of psychological impact in the organisations transformative field. This cultural field is not neutral or descriptive: it functions, in line with Gestalt logic, as a figure-ground dynamic, constantly forming and re-forming under tensions and *versatilities* from within and outside the organisation. While Schein's concept of culture can be understood as the psychological guide into a transformation process, the Morphological versions aim to *make the evolving process itself visible*, ultimately directing it towards development and change possibilities. The research is conducted with empirical curiosity and methods alike of *ethnological research*, aiming to understand the unknown culture and society of a distant tribe (see v. Rosenstiel & Nerdinger, 2011, p. 391; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Data is collected and gathered mostly through interviews and observations within the field of the organisation, considering all communication the organisation holds importance to, with *an intentional mixture of engagement and critical abstinence* (Fitzek, 2011a).

1. Basic quality (Grundqualität): Grasping the pre-Gestalt

The first methodical step in morphological cultural diagnosis is referred to as the *Grundqualität* ('basic quality') that defines the earliest, symbolically condensed impression of an organisation. This first version of the Gestalt is in large captured by how the organisation initially presents itself, both to outsiders and to itself, through objects, language but also behaviour and self-image including objectives and problem determination.

According to Fitzek (2008, p. 488), this version primarily attends to the *early image analysis*, capturing self-statements and visible aspects of organisational life. He draws an explicit parallel to Schein's first cultural framework, writing in the sense of the first version "artefacts refer then to the phenomenal precedence" of Gestalt theory (Fitzek, 2008, p. 487). These early expressions - *symbols, spatial dynamics, moods* - are not neutral data points but crucial parts in the process of capturing the Gestalt, symbolic figures that shape and guide perception. As such, the Grundqualität is not an external description but a psychologically active configuration of what is described in Gestalt theory as pre-figurative or 'Pre-Gestalt' (*Vorgestalt*). This "first impression is not a minor detail but shapes the further experience of the organisation significantly, as *an early and dominant Gestalt*" (Fitzek, 2009, p.

208, trans.). Importantly, the early structure is mostly introduced by a more sentimental atmospheric perceptual formation captured in a Pre-Gestalt '*dynamic*' often *projected by and onto the researchers and project stake holders themselves* (see Fitzek, 2011a, p. 122). It arises from the first seconds of contact and must be treated as an experiential entry point. The Pre-Gestalt does not yet stabilize into a cultural figure but forms a *phenomenological entry* within which diagnosis unfolds, giving away important early qualities and tunes like first glimpses on a picture.

The first version of the morphological analysis is guided through this initial *experiential access* to the organisation (Fitzek, 2007, p. 6). Here, the hypotheses of the earliest raw *Typification* are translated into a descriptive Gestalt, reflecting the *psychodynamics* of the first contact, artefacts and first '*gut feelings*' (Fitzek, 2011a). Such early image of the subject follows a *reconstructive description* of a simpler 'what is?' rather than 'why it is?'. The goal here is to *guide the description towards the frame, texture and dominant atmospheric foundation of the figure without intellectualizing for reasons and normative logic*. This firstly reveals a dominant side that aligns more with the conscious and desired self-image of the organisation. It primarily reflects how the organisation legitimates itself as a *raison d'être* and its actions. There is a strong resemblance to obvious artifacts and self-statements like office spaces, marketing actions, goals and loudly told stories to this early approach to the Gestalt. While the organisation might also suffer from this - often noble, always deeply rooted, and historically learned - layer of identity, it has adapted to hold and depend on this core pattern as a guiding point for identity and way to do things (Fitzek, 2009, p. 208). In our case study, this initial *predominant Gestalt* was described and translated into a basal quality "*between performance and professionalism*". Already in this first version of descriptive *Gestalt reconstruction* is a glimpse of *tension* that prevents pure harmony (and stagnation) of the predominant poles. As all Gestalts are volatile and fluctuating in morphological terms, there is always a conflicting counterpart. It is just impossible to follow and cultivate one forcefield alone without needing, missing or neglecting others (Fitzek, 2009, p. 203). However, this *opposing pole* is not just a destructive antagonist. It is essential for development, helping to balance out the one-sided dominance of its counterpart. *Only by pairing the dominant outgoing qualities with the more hidden and hurtful counterpart can one begin to grasp the dynamic, mental effort, and energy a Gestalt (resp. culture) has to endure in between. In our case, these qualities were reflected in an already existing self-image within the organisation: that of a fast, agile dinghy navigating through fog. This narrative, which predated our involvement, was taken up as a shared metaphor and used to translate our analytical findings into the organisation's own idiosyncratic language.*

This *Grundqualität* does not merely name what is seen, it recognizes what is allowed to be seen, and what indicates to be hidden, undefined or even forbidden.

It is the first Early-Gestalt expression of the system's *cultural grammar, shaped by historical development and psychic cultivation*. And as Fitzek (2008) shows, it is no coincidence that this phase strongly corresponds to Schein's artefact layer: both represent *the surface of culture* but already contain figural tensions that gesture toward the deeper architecture of the organisation.

2. Figuration: Dynamics of orientation

As the first version is primarily about getting a sense of the psychodynamic structure as early image analysis (Fitzek, 2008, p. 490), the second version of the morphological framework focuses more on understanding how this structure is psychologically built and maintained in interaction.

Here, in reference to Norbert Elias (1939/2021), *figurations*, interdependent and constructive relational structures of Gestalten, are compiled by condensing the material into a *unifying description* (*Vereinheitlichende Beschreibung*), marking patterns and interrelationships of the phenomena (Fitzek, 2000). The psychological organisation's vivid life is described as a holistic structure, where the formative dimensions interact through *polarizations, counter-directions, correspondences, and supplements within a spectrum of effects and counter-effects*. These complex figurations are often represented through *images of archetypal urges, fears, compulsions, and struggles*. Through this process, the description follows the narrative-symbolic form of psychic experience, the *dynamic of formation and transformation* ("*Gestalt und Verwandlung*"), Gestalt-being, and its transformative valences (Fitzek, 2011a, 2017). As Fitzek (2007, p. 55) points out, the *second version* corresponds closely to Schein's second cultural level: values and normative orientation patterns (*Orientierungsmuster*). However, unlike in functionalist culture models, values here are not conceptual statements or declared priorities. They are understood as lived, symbolic patterns embedded within *psychodynamic constellations*, often revealing their true effect only in the *contradictions of inner polarities and their tensions*. In this way, the Figuration exposes the *symbolic structure* of the field, not as neutral behaviour, but as the psychic structure of the impact unit. Fitzek (2014, p. 20) extends this by linking Schein's concept of values as orientation patterns to Kurt Lewin's theory of *dynamic tension systems* (*Spannungssysteme*). In his reading, values do not merely express opinions or attitudes; they are representations of *a psychodynamic field*, shaped by inner and outer directional forces - valences, barriers, and environmental conditions - which exert real, structuring influence. The organisation's *emotional climates and collective attitudes* are, thus, not random but represent *systemic expressions of field conditions as cultivated responses to environmental and internal challenges*. These figurations are the level at which the diagnostic process reveals the symbolic shape of psychological dynamics: how the organisation positions itself *between desire and inhibition, assertion and limitation, openness and closure*. The result is a 'map', not

of concepts, but of lived psychodynamic structure: the field of cultural orientation that actively forms and transforms to sustain the organisation's identity and viability. To reconstruct the dynamic interaction of psychic forces more systematically, the morphological approach often makes use of the *Hexagram*, a six-fold matrix that offers structured orientation for describing the *Wirkungszusammenhang* (dynamic field of interaction) of psychic Gestalten designed by Salber in 1969. He created this set of six archetypal figurative factors, each striving toward a specific direction of cultivation to display the complex *force field of opposing poles, illustrating the underlying conflict of tension and fulfillment* (Salber, 1969/1981, p. 126). By applying the collected phenomena to this force field, the *Figuration* along with its dramatic potentials and limitations can be *reconstructed* and brought to a better understanding (see Fig. 1). While it was developed as a general structure for understanding the formation and transformation of *psychic objects* (*Gegenstände*), it has proven especially effective in applied fields such as market and media psychology, as well as in organisational consulting. Crucially, the hexagram is not a tool to be 'filled out' or applied schematically. It does not replace the core method of precise morphological description, but introduces a *flexible structure of psychological possibilities* ("*Erweiterungs-, Entfaltungs- und Ergänzungsmöglichkeiten*") (Salber, 1969/1981, p. 136), that help organise the internal *figural dynamics* without prematurely fixing or reducing them. The hexagram lays out three intersecting axes of psychological interaction, each composed of two interdependent polarities: *Aneignung* (*Absorbing*) vs. *Umbildung* (*Becoming*), *Einwirkung* (*Shaping*) vs. *Anordnung* (*Organising*), and *Ausbreitung* (*Expanding*) vs. *Ausrüstung* (*Equipping*). These are not external analytical categories but represent dimensions of inner movement and tension, the very conditions of *Gestalt-formation*. In the second version of morphological analysis, these axes can help reconstruct how the internal logic of meaning structures (*Wirkungszusammenhänge*) is built as a *dynamic process* (*Strukturierungsprozess*).

When applied to organisations, these dimensions can be translated to practical themes:

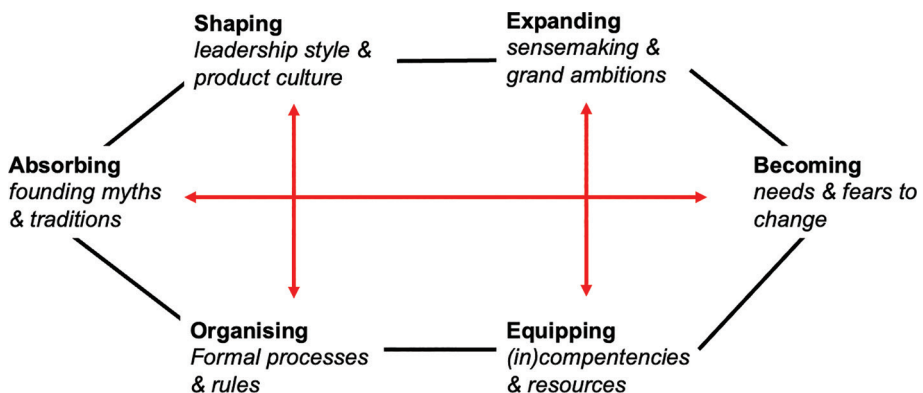


Figure 1. Hexagram according to Salber, adapted for organisational analysis.

What emerges is not a typology but a nuanced portrait of the organisation's figural dynamics. As Fitzek (2023, p. 273, trans.) articulates, the polarities function as a "search grid", a *Gestalt-dynamic compass designed to trace, structure, and orient within the organisation's internal field of tensions*. This can be directly translated to Lewinian terms of *dynamic valence structures*: forces that pull, inhibit and direct organisational energy (Fitzek, 2011b, 2014). Used in this spirit, the hexagram does not inherently provide a solution or diagnosis, but enables orientation: how to understand the structure of meaning, contradiction, and transformation within an organisational culture and how to perceive the deeper psychological economy that produces both struggle and coherence. Reconstructing these *psychodynamic valences* offers a foundation for development, rooted in these *powerful forces subconsciously 'at work' beneath the surface*. An exemplary application of the hexagram as used in consulting is shown in our case study in this volume.

3. Transformation pattern: Psycho-dynamic arch-narrative

In the next step of the framework, the study follows subconscious patterns and moves away from the concrete subject to rediscover the psychological Gestalt, conserved in human history and descriptions of life. Following Sigmund Freud's idea of *arche-complexes*, morphological theory holds that the great human themes - *transformation problems* (*Verwandlungsprobleme*) - are preserved and confronted in our *eternal narratives* (Fitzek, 2008, p. 490). These appear in myths, religious writings, and fairy tales. As problems are "treated" through these narratives, they become constitutive factors of culture (see Boesch, 1991; Jung, 1964/2012). They shape how we deal with life, its hardships, and its vast spectrum of *opportunities for metamorphosis* (*Verwandlungsangebote*) (Salber, 1993). For organisations, this does not simply translate into a legend of greatness or a metaphor to casually pick from (as PR and marketing companies often lead one to believe). The *meaning structures* of the specific story must be analysed and brought to the surface. Morphological psychology draws from a rich repertoire of analysed myths and fairy tales (Salber, 1993, 2018) to understand the underlying drama within these deep rooted narratives. Again, only by describing and analysing everyday pattern can the concrete cultivation dynamics be translated into the artful abstraction of a *complex psychodynamic analogy* (Fitzek, 2009, p. 209). In this process, yet another version of the Gestalt is brought to the surface. This helps not only to understand the process behind everyday problems and the cultural foundation of the organisation but adds possibilities to deal with deeper, *general encompassing ambiguities, primal and elementary cultivations* that characterise the organisations in its deepest psychological being and becoming. What emerges is not so much a 'solution for all problems' but rather a general orientation in navigating the paradoxes of existence as a processual *guideline for potential developments, their chances and*

risks (Fitzek, 2017, p. 29). This third version in many ways corresponds to what Schein (1985) described as the level of basic assumptions: *unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs that form the perceptual and emotional background of organisational life*. As Fitzek (2007, p. 9) notes, this layer is not accessed by abstraction but reconstructed through symbolic configurations that reflect how the organisation manages *core dilemmas, conflicts and its existential orientation in the world*.

In this sense, the deep symbolic form revealed in the third version does not merely reflect conflict; it preserves a *narrative of cultivations* to deal with what Lewin described as the dynamic tension field. As Fitzek (2007, p. 20) paraphrases, values and attitudes must be understood as *representations of a “Wirkungswelt”, a world of psychological forces and barriers* that shape perception and action. In this third version, those same *field conditions* are symbolised as mythic *polarities: dramatic, stylised condensations of the organisation’s formative tensions and historical contradictions*. The result is not a final truth about the organisation but a *new depth of understanding*, one that can *transform resistance into reflection, and expose the tacit scripts that shape experience and behaviour afar from the restrictions of rational logic*.

In our case study, you will see how Grimm’s fairy tale *Mary’s Child* can teach us something about the greed to become everything and how *wanting to be all* ultimately carries the danger of *becoming nothing*. When translated back, the narrative can present new perspectives on real-life possibilities for conciliation, acceptance, balance, and agility, without getting stuck in fixation of old patterns. While these narrative structures are usually not something to share in detail with the client system, *retranslating the psychological structure of the arche-problem* into the everyday reality of the organisation’s culture offers entirely new ways of addressing challenges and reflecting old self-harming habits on a way to develop new and better ways (see Fitzek, 2007, 2009, 2017).

4. Solution types: From diagnosis to cultural orientation and management consulting

In the *fourth version* the organisational Gestalt research shifts from diagnostic to orientation and *from analysing to consulting*. Here, the abstract psychological patterns and core problems uncovered in earlier versions are carefully retranslated into the real life *tangible possibilities*: behavioural shifts, new leadership postures and strategic reflections (Fitzek, 2023, p. 278). Yet this step is not about implementing fixed solutions. Rather, it opens space for *co-creative exploration* with the right partners inside the organisation (Fitzek, 2008, p. 490). Fitzek (2000, p. 5) describes, possible types of solutions *Lösungstypen* require a movement “back and forth” between reflection and dialogue, a *responsive process* in which meaning is tested, adjusted, and related to the system’s actual capacity for transformation. This understanding again shows many parallels with Schein’s (1988) concept

of “*process consulting*”. The ideas and learnings of version one to three *must not only make sense intellectually, but be felt, experienced, and integrated* into course of actions and developmental options to implement. This fourth step also includes acknowledging the system’s *resistances*. In morphological terms, these are not obstacles to get rid of, but crucial parts of the diagnostic material itself: “*Demonstrationsmechanismen*” (Salber, 1980/2001, p. 98) that showcase (“*demonstrate*”) what the organisation cannot yet face or clings to for stability, even if at great cost of making the same mistakes over and over again. Here, the connections to Lewin and Schein become visible again. Lewin’s notion of action research emphasized that learning and change arise only through *iterative, participatory engagement* (Cummings et al., 2016; Lewin, 1946). Schein (1988, p. 148, 2016) similarly positioned the consultant as a *process partner*, whose task is not to intervene from above, but to humbly support the organisation in developing its own insight and orientation over time. From this perspective, the outcome of the fourth version is not a fixed intervention plan. Rather, it offers a comprehensive psychological understanding of the organisation’s Gestalt, presenting an outlook that can *support ongoing development, guide responses to current challenges, and open space for deeper cultural learning in the face of future uncertainty*.

In our example, the first and foremost development that required assertiveness was a process of reflection on limiting the ‘*omnipotence*’ and recognising that such an elusive Gestalt had no chance of completion. How development was initially rejected, leading to a painful climax of the old problematic ‘*we can do it all*’ mentality, before a new ‘*grown up*’ culture could establish, is illustrated in our case study.

Outlook

The present paper has traced a theoretical and methodological trajectory from Kurt Lewin’s field theory, through Edgar Schein’s model of organisational culture, into the morphological approach to culture diagnosis. Each step reflects a commitment to Gestalt principles: understanding organisations not as collections of discrete behaviours or elements, but as *dynamic psychological configurations: structured, symbolic, and in constant transformation*.

What morphological diagnosis contributes is not just a technique for intervention, but a deepened form of cultural understanding. It offers a *figural, processual view of organisational reality*, one that takes seriously the *contradictions, resistances, and symbolic narratives* that shape an institution’s self-experience. Diagnosis in this sense is not a precursor to change; it is itself part of the cultural development, making visible what usually remains unspoken. As such, this framework opens new paths, not to ready-made solutions, but to *possibility: for dialogue, for reflexive leadership, and for long-term cultural development*. Future work continues in this

direction, notably in ongoing research at BSP Business and Law School Berlin, including a doctoral dissertation by Mair on the *application of morphological therapy and culture diagnosis methods to organisational development consulting*. There is also growing attention to the role of *artistic and aesthetic formats in organisational reflection*, formats that, as Fatzer and Fanenbruck (2024) have shown, honour Schein's dialogical spirit by embracing symbolic forms of knowing. As Fitzek (2009, 2014) suggests, morphology has much to offer in this space, another connection remaining to be developed. In all of this, the influence of Edgar H. Schein remains unmistakable. He passed away in January 2023, leaving behind not only a foundational body of work, but perhaps even more importantly a spirit of deep humanism and intellectual humility. For us, his writing and thinking have been a constant source of orientation and inspiration. His legacy will forever live on in the field of Organisational Development and in all those who continue to explore the complexity of human systems through dialogue, reflection, and learning. This paper stands in appreciation of his legacy.

Summary

This paper explores the application of Gestalt psychological principles in the analysis of organisational culture and transformation. Tracing a conceptual lineage from early Gestalt psychology through Kurt Lewin's field theory and Edgar Schein's organisational culture model, the authors demonstrate how psychological holism and dynamic thinking continue to shape contemporary organisational diagnosis. Central to the discussion is the morphological method developed by Wilhelm Salber and further advanced by Herbert Fitzek, which interprets organisational cultures as symbolic, evolving Gestalts. The paper outlines a four-stage model of cultural diagnosis that emphasises perceptual dynamics, symbolic figuration, and psychodynamic tensions. The authors illustrate how deep structures of meaning, contradiction, and orientation can be surfaced and reworked within the organisational field. The study concludes by affirming the potential of morphological analysis to support reflexive organisational development and cultural transformation.

Keywords: Gestalt psychology, organisational psychology, organisational development, action research, organisational culture.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Anwendung gestaltpsychologischer Prinzipien in der Analyse von Organisationskultur und -wandel. Ausgehend von der klassischen Gestaltpsychologie über Kurt Lewins Feldtheorie bis hin zum Modell der Organisationskultur von Edgar Schein zeichnen die Autoren eine konzeptuelle Entwicklung nach, die psychologischen Ganzheit ins Zentrum stellt. Im Mittelpunkt steht die von Wilhelm Salber entwickelte und von Herbert Fitzek weitergeführte morphologische Methode, die Organisationskulturen als symbolische, sich wandelnde Gestalten versteht. Der Aufsatz stellt den vierstufigen morphologische Versionengang als Analyseverfahren vor, in dem durch verschiedenen Perspektiven Wahrnehmungsdynamiken, symbolische Figurationen, psychodynamische Spannungen und schließlich Lösungen in den Fokus gerückt werden. Die Autoren zeigen auf, wie tief liegende Bedeutungsstrukturen, Widersprüche und Orientierungsfiguren

innerhalb organisationaler Felder rekonstruiert und bearbeitet werden können. Die Studie demonstriert wie auf Basis der morphologischen Kulturdiagnostik eine reflexive co-kreative Organisationsentwicklung von der Analyse bis hin zur Beratung konzipiert werden kann.

Schlüsselwörter: Gestaltpsychologie, Organisationspsychologie, Organisationsentwicklung, Aktionsforschung, Organisationskultur.

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