

Discussant Commentary

Group Coherence:

Its Shadow and Its Generative Potential

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Abstract

The purpose of this commentary is to offer reflections on the phenomenological inquiry undertaken by Guenther (2022), exploring the nature and potential of group coherence in addressing our global meta-crises. I deepen the discourse in three interrelated areas, to expand our understanding of collective coherence and to explore how we can approach researching it. Firstly, I highlight research, mapping the evidence for consciousness-based practices in engendering greater social harmony and coherence. Secondly, I shine a light onto the shadow sides of coherence and how the power of coherence may be abused for ill purposes. I argue that the cultivation of coherence must not only involve consciousness-raising practices, but that it must also entail direct engagement with social and systemic wounds and fragmentation. Thirdly, I call for multi-faceted forms of research, to enable us to gain a deeper appreciation of group coherence in varied life contexts. Building on Guenther's vision, I affirm that this research must invite alternative and participatory ways of knowing, so that a multiplicity of voices, inner and outer, are heard and honoured in action.

Keywords

group coherence, consciousness, social fields, social transformation, the shadows and amorality of coherence, expanded ways of knowing, holistic intelligence, participatory and transpersonal research

The purpose of this commentary is to offer further reflections on the phenomenological inquiry undertaken by Guenther (2022), exploring the nature and potential of group coherence in addressing our global meta-crises. Given the extreme forms of polarisation and division which we have been experiencing in many spheres of public life, the idea of researching and evolving ways to generate collective coherence—also described in Guenther’s paper as “group beingness”—is very compelling. It is hard to bear witness to the multi-faceted forms of fragmentation that continue to proliferate in our social, economic, and political systems, generating rampant forms of intolerance and extremism. I find it deeply heartening that an increasing number of people in business, leadership, education, and research are seeking to develop frameworks and practices that aim to seed transformative “we-spaces” (Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016; Patten, 2018) and enable the emergence of collective wisdom (Morgan & Murphy, 2022). The pursuit of generative group coherence, and the aim to research what might enable it, fits readily into these new approaches to practice and research, and it makes a vital contribution to the evolution of human consciousness and culture. Responding to Guenther, I deepen the discourse in three interrelated areas, with the hope that the considerations given below might help us to expand our understanding of collective coherence and how we can approach researching it.

Firstly, I highlight research, mapping the evidence for consciousness-based practices in engendering greater social coherence and harmony. In doing so, I capture glimpses of the potential and challenges that lie before us as we actively seek to engender coherence. Secondly, I shine a light onto the shadow sides of coherence and how the power of collective consciousness may be abused for ill purposes. Here, I emphasise that the cultivation of human consciousness must not only revolve around the calling forth of our *best selves* but also invite direct engagement with our wounds and fragmentation in order to heal them. Thirdly, I call for multi-faceted forms of research, to enable us to gain a deeper appreciation of group coherence in varied life contexts. Building on Guenther’s (2022) vision, I want to affirm that this research must invite alternative and participatory ways of knowing, so that a multiplicity of voices, inner and outer, are heard and honoured in action.

Understanding Coherence and Its Generative Potential

An increasing number of researchers and practitioners working at the interface of inner development and outer transformation are exploring the value of consciousness-based (spiritual) practices in engendering social change (Wamsler

et al., 2022; Rothberg, 2008; McIntosh, 2012; Nicol, 2015; Patten, 2018). Building on the premise that consciousness is a non-local phenomenon, Nicol (2015) advances a nuanced argument for the potential of spiritual practices in reducing human conflict and engendering greater global coherence and peace. The core argument that Nicol unfolds is this: Beneath the surface appearance of separation, human beings are embedded in deeper fields of consciousness which are nested and correspond to units of social organisation—from families, to communities, to nations, to earth, and cosmos. At the deepest level, Nicol suggests, there exists “a unified field that underlies both the human mind and the natural world” (2015, p. 153). Individuals are profoundly influenced in their thinking and behaviour by these nested fields and, critically, they can also influence them, contributing to and shaping the collective memory of fields. One mechanism posited for exerting influence is that of morphic resonance (Sheldrake, 1981, 1988), which entails a nonenergetic transfer of information. As Nicol (2015) describes it, morphic resonance thus “involves a kind of action at a distance in both space and time, in which past patterns of activity influence the behaviour of subsequent similar systems” (p. 136). Sheldrake (1981, 1988) asserts that morphic fields evolve over time, accumulating the habits and learning of all members, past and present, of a particular organisational unit, such as a species or social group. In transpersonal psychology we find similar proposals, suggesting that consciousness-transforming, or healing, practices may impact the explicit, phenomenal realm by influencing the deeper layers of the collective unconscious (von Franz, 1985).

The idea that group coherence may influence social dynamics at scale has been subject to research in several arenas. Likely most well-known are studies into the Maharishi Effect that have shown significant correlations between the practice of transcendental meditation in large group assemblies and improvements in social indicators, such as crime rates (Borland & Landrith, 1976; Dillbeck, Landrith & Orme-Johnson, 1981; Dillbeck, Cavanaugh, et al., 1987), and war deaths (Orme-Johnson et al., 1988) in certain geographic locations. The research has rightly been subject to scrutiny and some critique, but as Nicol (2015) remarks, the Maharishi Effect has now been demonstrated in dozens of studies published in reputable scientific journals and the results have been statistically significant to impressive degrees.

Another initiative worthy of mention is the Global Consciousness Project (GCP), which utilises internet technology and random number generators to record the effects of significant world events on human consciousness. The GCP is an international collaboration of around 100 scientists originally created at Princeton University and now logistically overseen by the [Institute of Noetic Sciences](https://noetic.org)¹ in the USA. The GCP collects data from a global network of random number generators located in up to 70 host sites around the world. The project

¹ <https://noetic.org>

examines subtle correlations between the occurrence of major global events and the coherence of what should be random number events at the given time. So far, the results of the project appear to indicate that meditation and prayer events, organised at a large scale, as well as events of significant global interest, generate subtle effects of coherence in the physical world (Nelson, 2001a; Nelson, 2001b; Nelson & Radin, 2003; Nelson & Bancel, 2011). Nicol (2015) concludes, “The combined evidence strongly suggests that nonlocality [or interconnectedness, JB] is indeed not limited to the quantum realm but can also operate at the macroscopic level, and that the practice of techniques like meditation or prayer by large groups of people may have a measurable effect on levels of social harmony” (p. 120). This said, we must acknowledge that the research output and conclusions reached have also been repeatedly reviewed and critiqued for potential experimenter biases (Bancel, 2017a, 2017b).

Some theorists and practitioners suggest that a certain threshold must be crossed to affect fields of consciousness in significant ways, requiring either large numbers of people or groups of highly experienced practitioners who are able to generate coherence of sufficient intensity (Orme-Johnson & Dillbeck, 1987; Bache, 2000). Of course, that is not to say that all work aiming to increase group coherence must be directed at larger scales. I rather agree with McIntosh (2008) that we do well to cultivate both small and large initiatives. It is in the intimacy of smaller projects that we can tap our sense of belonging to specific places and communities and thereby generate actions that arise from this embeddedness. McIntosh (2008) proposes that, when awakened, our unique sense of place feeds our identity, values, and responsibility, thereby helping us to cultivate sustainable and wholesome forms of action. It is this rooted sense of agency that helps us to contribute to meaningful changes in the world, with outcomes that will likely ripple across scales and domains in unexpected ways. As O’Brien (2021) puts it, “Through our entangled intra-actions, we are mattering in every moment. But it’s not just the expression of agency that matters. Rather, it is the quality of agency that we are interested in; a quality that recognizes oneness and is expressed through values inherent to the whole, such as equity, diversity, and compassion. When these values are at the heart of individual agency, collective agency, and political agency, it is possible to generate new, fractal-like patterns that replicate across scales, in every moment” (pp. 98–99).

Grappling with the Shadows and the Amorality of Coherence

Looking at the evidence presented above, we might feel compelled to assume that our salvation lies in the collective pursuit of consciousness-raising practices to foster ever greater expressions of coherence. I want to sound a note of caution here, in that I believe that nurturing the kinds of changes we want to see in the world requires more than a conscious striving for harmony, putting forward our “best selves,” as Guenther (2022, p. 162) and her research participants have put it. Results from the GCP show that negative global events that reach a

significant number of people around the world can also temporarily increase coherence. Coherence is essentially an amoral phenomenon which manifests when many people align their attention; and it can be used for good, as well as ill, intent.

I would like suggest that the pursuit of greater global harmony and peace requires us to dwell in and integrate our shadows, as well as to embrace consciousness-raising practices. As integral practitioners like DiPerna & Augustine (2014) put it, we need to “clean up” as much as we need to “wake up,” “grow up” and “show up.” As I have elaborated elsewhere (Bockler, 2021), in order to achieve greater social and cultural integration we need to enable compassionate relational spaces in which we can attend to othering and suffering in ways that honour the experiences and perspectives of those we disagree with, bearing witness to the shadows of human kind. In many places, attending to fragmentation and othering may be necessary prerequisites for the kinds of consciousness-raising practices Guenther (2022) deployed in her study. Otherwise, we risk falling prey to (social) forms of spiritual bypassing (Welwood, 2000), i.e., using our spiritual practices to side-step emotional, social, and systemic injustices and wounds. In a similar vein, Nicol (2015) acknowledges that narratives of unified consciousness “might be viewed with suspicion as yet another ‘totalizing unity’ that promises emancipation, yet which in fact perpetuates oppression” (p. 161). Given all this, I feel that we must honour our differences, as much as we must seek to own our shadows.

Coherence is amoral, and it has throughout history been used for devious, as well as benevolent, purposes. One need only to look at the mass rallies organised by the Nazi regime which generated social fields charged with enormous energetic coherence, interlacing emotional contagion with coercion, and inspiring much hatred, bigotry, and violence. Or, indeed, we may look at extremist and religious cults which have exploited the very human need for belonging and intimate connection to subjugate individual will and agency. Thus, we need to explore the conditions that foster the emergence of healthy and liberating group fields, leading to collective wisdom, versus coercive ones that may seed collective forms of folly and perpetuate structures of oppression.

Nicol (2015) asserts that our challenge lies in developing a more complex understanding between the individual and the whole, “one that honours differentiation and distinctness as vital components of any authentic wholeness” (p. 161). This principle applies intra- relationally as much as it applies inter- relationally. Within us exist a multiplicity of voices, some dominant, some less so, others entirely repressed. Similarly, in all social contexts, there are dominant voices that drive the discourse as well as voices that have been marginalised and even silenced. We must endeavour to co-create participatory spaces in which we can be real, vulnerable, compassionate, and open-hearted as much as open-minded. A participatory approach to group emergence means embracing a stance of *active receptivity* (Bockler & Hector, 2022), which entails committing to calibrating our actions in response to what is arising in the unfolding moment of

our (shared) experience. Here, we must learn to release, or at least attenuate, our assumptions and cultivate our capacities for listening to the subtle cues calling from the edges of our awareness. Equally, we must be prepared to hold space for dissent, allowing antagonism and resistance to express themselves. If we can do that, Bohm (1996) suggests in his reflections on group dialogue, we may be able to cultivate a sense of fellowship through mutual participation. Such shared group consciousness is not necessarily immediately pleasant, Bohm asserts. “People tend to think of common consciousness as ‘shared bliss.’ That may come; but if it does, I’m saying that the road to it is through this. We have to share the consciousness that we *actually* have. We can’t just impose another one” (1996, p. 33).

A number of scholars and practitioners have begun to explore and map the conditions conducive for the emergence of wholesome group intelligence (Briskin et al., 2009; Gunnlaugson & Brabant, 2016; Patten, 2018). To me, their work illustrates that we must engage a full spectrum of practices that bridge inner with relational work, so that we may cultivate the necessary attitudes and capacities within ourselves to engage in group work with grace, presence, holistic intelligence, and sensitivity. Guenther would likely agree with my assertion that this imperative for integrative cultivation is one that applies to us all—individually and collectively.

Participatory and Transformative Approaches to Researching Coherence

Bearing these considerations in mind, I now want to expand on the kind of research needed to help us penetrate further into phenomena of coherence. In my view, Guenther (2022) rightly calls for multi-faceted forms of research, placing emphasis on first person (subjective) and second person (intersubjective) approaches and highlighting the need for expanded ways of knowing, so that we may gain a more holistic appreciation of coherence and what may enable it. My sense is that we need to study coherence in varied life contexts, paying attention to oppressive, as well as liberating, expressions of coherence. Group dynamics always have shadow aspects which are influenced by the social and systemic milieu, as well as by intersectionality and relational dynamics, leading to many overt and covert expressions of power and privilege within a group. Research exploring group coherence thus needs to be participatory and ethically sensitised, endeavouring to ensure that no voices within a given context are marginalised or omitted.

Recent decades have seen the emergence of a range of participatory research approaches, like *participatory action research* (e.g., Chevalier & Buckles, 2019), *appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), and *cooperative inquiry* (Heron, 1996). These methods all embrace a *participatory worldview* (Ferrer, 2002) which contrasts strongly with the positivist/mechanistic perspective, in that within these approaches “experiential reality is seen as a dynamic

cocreation between interdependent players within living systems” (Sohmer, 2019, p. 67). Participatory forms of research aim to acknowledge and empower research participants as co-researchers, thereby honouring their rights “to participate in processes that seek to generate knowledge about them” (Sohmer, 2019, p. 67).

Relatedly, forms of transpersonal research have evolved, incorporating expanded epistemologies that welcome contemplative, embodied, imaginal, and intuitive ways of knowing (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Braud & Anderson, 1998). Anderson & Braud (2011) have mapped a whole range of practices that can be deployed to enhance the preparedness of the researcher and the research participants, enabling more skilled work with forms of *direct knowing* that are cultivated in spiritual and wisdom traditions (e.g., knowing through presence, compassion, and love) as well as in the arts and humanities (e.g., knowing through play, imagination, embodiment, artisanship, etc.).

In my view, it is these participatory and transpersonal methods that will enable us to come into a deeper relationship with phenomena of coherence, by helping us to attend to the “warm data” (Bateson, 2021) that make visible something of the complexity of any group dynamic in its real-life contexts. Given that group coherence practices are now sought after in many arenas of social change, we need to acknowledge that our established ways of knowing and doing are, frankly, impaired and limited by our very own preconceptions and polemics of change which we perpetuate in our social circles and cultural narratives. As Bateson (2022) asserts, every framework and theory of change effectively narrows our perception of possibilities and becomes an obstacle to our readiness for emergence. Transpersonal research methods can help us to decouple from established norms of knowledge generation, by engendering deautomatisation of perception, thinking, and behaviour (Bockler, 2021). If we can open the aperture of our perception, learn to listen to and to be with each other in the fullness of our being, and embrace resonance and dissonance alike, perhaps we can learn to be with the crises that now besiege us without feeling the immediate compulsion to fix them or to make anything happen. In this surrender of our compulsions may lie the true liberation of our being and the fuller realisation of our capacities, which, in turn, may give rise to truly unfathomed possibilities.

Conclusion

Guenther (2022, p. 167) concludes her own paper stating, “As we evolve in our abilities as human beings, as demonstrated in our capacity to experience coherence, should we not also evolve our thinking about what is possible and what is important in terms of empirical study?”

I whole-heartedly agree—and, as I see it, this means revisiting our presuppositions that dictate to us what is possible. From my perspective, this essentially entails understanding consciousness as a nonlocal and fundamental property of the universe (Barušs & Mossbridge, 2017; Lorimer, 2019), rather than defining it as an emergent phenomenon arising from individual brain activity. This perspective helps to normalise phenomena—such as psi—that

Guenther (2022) described as anomalous and otherworldly. What if we gave ourselves permission to accept these diverse states of consciousness and extended human capacities as a “new normal” and sought to incorporate them in our working practices and research? My sense is that this could revolutionise our scientific discourse and understanding of what is unfolding in these unprecedented times.

I want to conclude this commentary by sharing a story. In the late 1990s, when I was in my early twenties and still an undergraduate student pursuing studies in community arts and acting, I had the serendipitous opportunity to train in conflict resolution with Centre de Médiation et de Formation à la Médiation (CMFM) in France. CMFM pursued a transformative model of mediation, advocating transcendence of a conflict over following the mainstream path of negotiated settlement. At the core of CMFM’s training approach were role plays which tapped into the underlying, universal dynamics of human conflict. Each session began as a simulation of conflict between two trainees as adversaries, accompanied by three trainees acting as mediators. As the mediations progressed, the simulations felt increasingly real as they became rooted in the inner life of the trainees. The confrontations in the room, the anger, the pain, the tears felt entirely real. And yet as time went by, we began to experience profound states of opening, leading to deep compassion and even love between us. These experiences of group beingness were enabled by practices of witnessing and mirroring, expressing the pain and suffering we perceived. It struck me that in Guenther’s (2022) research, the gazing practices were similarly regarded as powerful in enabling shifts. Witnessing each other in our fullness, honouring darkness and light in more expansive, compassionate, and intentional ways, may well be at the core of what is needed to engender greater coherence in the world today.

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