

2221 Theory & Practice 1: Lecture 12
FREDERICK S. (FRITZ) PERLS (1893-1970)
 &
LAURA PERLS (1905-1990)

GESTALT THERAPY

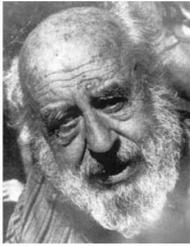
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Lose your mind and come to your senses.

Fritz Perls

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INTRODUCTION



Fritz Perls was born in Berlin to lower-middle class Jewish parents. At school, he failed 7th grade twice and was expelled from school for his disobedient attitude. Nevertheless, he completed his schooling and gained a M. D. specialising in psychiatry. He joined the army during WW1 as a medic.

He worked with Kurt Goldstein in Frankfurt helping brain-damaged soldiers and from him learned the value of understanding humans in their wholeness (Corey, 1996: 223). In Frankfurt, he met his future wife Lore.



Laura (originally Lore) married Fritz in 1930. She had a doctorate in perceptual psychology and studied with Kurt Goldstein for two years. She was analysed by Frieda Fromm-Reichmann and began her own practice with Otto Fenichel as her supervisor. She had studied under the well-known Gestalt psychologists Kohler and Koffka (University of Frankfurt) as well as Paul Tillich and Martin Buber (famous existential theologians) (Daniels, 2000: n. p.). She knew much about modern dance, Feldenkreis and Alexander methods of body work.

Fritz moved to Vienna was analysed by Wilhelm Reich. He was also supervised by Horney, Otto Fenichel, and Helene Deutsch, all prominent members of the psychoanalytic school. The rise of the Nazis led them to flee to the Netherlands (Litt, 2000?: n. p.). Later, Ernest Jones¹ enabled them to get to South Africa. The couple collaborated on an important book, *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*² which challenged Freudian psychoanalysis (Litt, 2000). They were influenced by the holism of Jan Smuts, South African prime minister, plus numerous other influences mentioned below.

¹ A famous biographer of Freud's.

² Laura Perls has not received the recognition she should have received for her part in writing this book.

They immigrated to the U. S. in 1946 and broke away from the psychoanalytic tradition, developing their own therapy called *gestalt*. Gestalt is not easily translatable into English but roughly, it means

a whole, a pattern, a configuration, a cohesive one, a form that cannot be broken down without destroying it. It is the pattern of the whole that is indivisible; the relationship between the parts cannot change without destroying the particular gestalt (Wallen, 1970: 27).

In 1952, they established the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. Fritz and Laura parted company in the mid-50s after which Fritz settled in California, in Big Sur, giving seminars and work shops at the later famous Esalen Institute.

Corey comments that in person,

Perls was both vital and perplexing. People typically either responded to him in awe or found him harshly confrontive and saw him as meeting his own needs through showmanship. He was viewed variously as insightful, witty, bright, provocative, manipulative, hostile, demanding, and inspirational (1996: 223).

Some would say that Perls played the part of a guru and founded a cultist community doing little to discourage a sect-like atmosphere. However, Perls viewed with alarm some of the later developments in Gestalt, particularly those who advocated ‘the instant cure’ (Rosenfeld, n. d.: n. p.).

Litt (n. d.)³ speaks of the central importance of Perls’ wife, Laura, in the development of Gestalt therapy to the point where two streams of Gestalt therapy are now discernible. Whereas, Fritz’s was centred on his charismatic leadership and showmanship, Litt describes Laura Perls’ stream⁴ as being more egalitarian and democratic. She wrote much less than Fritz and hence, her work was not as well known as his was.

³ More recent editions of Corey make this same point and even argue that, without Laura, Perls’ work would never have gained the prominence that it has.

⁴ Laura directed the New York Institute when Perls went off to California.

BACKGROUND INFLUENCES

Jones and Butman (1991) describe Gestalt therapy as being the ‘most phenomenological and pragmatic of the humanistic approaches’. This latter description is borne out by Daniels’ (2000) listing of some 15 influences upon the therapy!!

Some of the more important of these include: early gestalt *psychology*, somatically-oriented psychoanalysis (e.g., Reich), European existentialism, phenomenology, theatre (Fritz), psychodrama (Moreno) (Fritz Perls), modern dance (Laura Perls), Zen Buddhism (Fritz), and the Californian counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s (Fritz). Not all these factors influenced Laura and Fritz in the same way, if at all. Laura has commented, ‘I was first a Gestaltist and then became an analyst. Fritz was an analyst first and then came to Gestalt and never quite got into it’ (Rosenfeld, n. d.)!

1. Somatically-oriented psychoanalysis

Laura Perls did not derive her emphasis on body posture etc. from Reich (as did Fritz who was analysed by Reich) but from a long association with modern dance from the age of eight. However, both Fritz and Perls used their observations of the body in their therapy on the understanding that the body was part of who the person was. Becoming aware of bodily movements and postures brings clients rapidly into the present.

2. European existentialism

Existentialism is based on the notion that existence is the foremost ‘characteristic’ of humankind. Existence comes before essence. That might sound abstract but it has huge implications that one can see around us in Australia today. If existence is primary then, say the existentialists, we must choose the form of our existence. Choice is dominant in our world, is it not? When this and this happens, we are told, ‘Well it’s your choice’. Sartre reasoned that existence is the hallmark of humanness because humankind would only have an essence if a God existed and he did not believe one did!! Hence, humankind is a God in that humankind simply exists but it exists because of its autonomous choices, which cannot be dictated by any external moral code.

Existing is a becoming, is process. We are not only *in* process, we *are* process. Because for human life 'existence' comes before 'essence', we are responsible to create our own essence. Our essence is not given to us (as for example, in the biblical idea of the image of God) and hence, we must exercise will to make ourselves in our own image.

To reckon with process we must accept the radical nature of the present. Only the present exists. Therapeutically, we choose to experience the past and the future in the present. We do not ruminate over the past; we do not worry about the future. We bring our rumination and our worry into the present and experience them in the present. Experiencing some event is more important than intellectualising⁵ about the event. From the present emerges the challenge to be responsible for one's destiny.

3. Phenomenology

May (1958: 83) says that phenomenologists believe that: 'to know fully *what* we are doing, to feel it, to experience it all through our being, is much more important than to know *why*' (emphasis his). This philosophy holds that if 'we fully know the *what*, the *why* will come along by itself' (p. 83). Phenomenology is a call to participate in the phenomenon rather than detaching oneself from the given experience. These phenomenological concerns are easily identifiable in Gestalt therapy's aims to increase the level of awareness of our experience of things within us and around us.

4. The Californian counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s

I well remember the turbulence of the 1960s when major cities in the world were besieged by student demonstrations about the cold war, free love, the nuclear threat, women's liberation and authoritarianism. In Paris and in other places, students ripped up walking pavement to provide missiles to attack police who tried to restore order. Many new songs entered the mainstream.

Students dropped out of their courses because they did not believe any more in the 'system' or because the 'pot' they smoked was having a serious affect on their ability to concentrate. Clothing changed. The conservatism of the 50s gave way to an

⁵ Fritz Perls hated intellectualising in therapy. However, he does not seem to have the same problem when he writes!

upsurge of new radical lifestyles such as communal living which were understood as efforts to break away from the strictures of *bourgeois* ('middle class' defined as predictable, safe and boring) life. Many young people gloried in being relatively poor as a protest against the defective materialism of their parents. Environment movements flourished. Injustices were decried.

However, as mentioned when we studied Carl Rogers, we must reckon the fact that the political activism stagnated and ran out of steam. People turned from commitments to external socio-political change to inner, psychological change aided by therapy. In fact, numbers of commentators have suggested that the US developed a narcissistic 'therapeutic culture' (e. g., Meador, 2000: n. p.; Rieff, 1966).

This same period saw the rise of messianic groups who claimed they had found a new messiah and formed communities around that figure. This type of outlook prospered on the west coast of the U. S., particularly in California, This characteristic is still in evidence today. Fritz Perls' work was centred in this counterculture milieu and evidenced many of its characteristics.

THE GESTALT APPROACH

One might well ponder how these seemingly divergent themes and movement could be welded into a unified whole. Daniels (2000: n. p.) describes Perls' genius as being one who had an 'unerring nose for crap'. He used what he took to be correct from the systems he had encountered and let 'the rest fall by the wayside' (Daniels, 2000). He did not bother to refute it but incorporated what was useful into his own practice.

Gestalt therapy may not be a pure form of Gestalt *psychology*. However, Gestalt therapy is a *genuine derivation* from early Gestalt psychology (Daniels, 2000). He lists 14 themes of early Gestalt *psychology* that have been directly taken over into Gestalt therapy! He writes that 'despite all these influences . . . the Gestalt outlook provides the centering point, the compass of Gestalt Therapy'. Votsmeier (1996: n. p.) agrees that the 'most important concept permeating all of Gestalt therapy is the notion of the "whole"' (gestalt). This relationship is expressed in Figure 1.

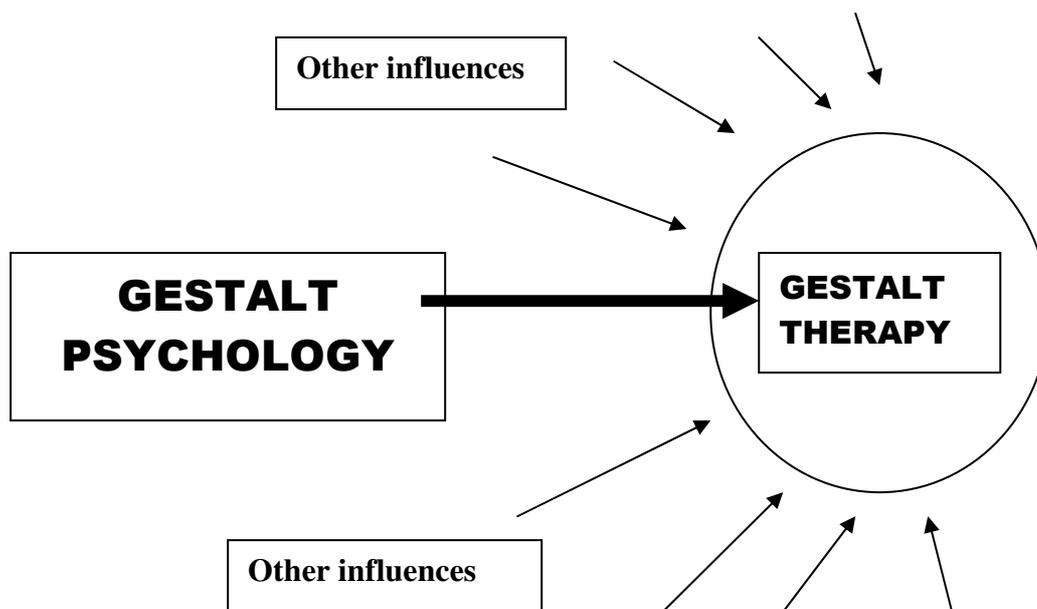


Figure 1 Relationship between Gestalt Psychology, other influences and Gestalt therapy

Wallen (1970: 8) expresses the relationship between Gestalt psychology and Gestalt as the application of the idea of ‘Gestalt formation and destruction’ to ‘the need-fulfillment pattern’⁶ in the individual. So as I type these words I am perhaps getting my need to do this work fulfilled. The ‘figure’⁷ is the typing and is the focus of my attention; the ‘ground’ is the other things around me.

But, if I begin to get peckish, then my typing may become the ground and my feeling of hunger becomes the figure. I may go to the pantry to get a cracker biscuit to eat. The ‘typing gestalt’ which had been originally formed is now destroyed and a new gestalt has been formed. Hence, Wallen (1970: 9) argues that our needs organise what we sense, feel and come to perceive, and our external actions.

[Christians should be concerned about this needs-based philosophy of Gestalt therapy. The therapy is ‘id-based’ without the restraining hand of the superego! How can one act in a moral way if all one acknowledges are needs (desires)?]

⁶ As we noted with Rogers, *needs* are central to Gestalt therapy, as they are in all humanistic therapy.

⁷ I am assuming you know these terms from basic psychology of perception. I refer to those ambiguous pictures that portray two faces or a vase depending which elements you select to be ‘figure’ and ‘ground’ that you can find in most basic psychology books.

When this process is working well the difference between ground and figure is clear. I know what I want and what is secondary at any one moment. However, when the process is not working well a blurring occurs among my wants. In fact, I become unable to say what I want and unable to fulfil my wants (Wallen, 1970: 10). The failure to fulfil wants means an interruption has occurred in the process of gestalt formation and destruction.

Interruptions may take the form of ‘poor perceptual contact with the external world and with the body itself’ (Wallen, 1970: 11). Clients are unable to maintain eye-contact with others and/or do not realise what they are doing with their hands, etc. A second type of interruption is when ‘the open expression of needs of blocked’ (Wallen, 1970: 11). For example, a person who wants physical affection is unable to ask for a hug (if appropriate) which leads to a chronic dulling of the perceptual field because the need is only weakly discharged.

A third interruption is repression which is understood in Reichian terms as a muscular occurrence. For example, suppose something happening to you is unfair and you feel angry. You feel the ‘need’ to swear at the guilty party but you hold in all of that anger because anger⁸ and angry words are not permitted according to your moral code. Wallen (1970: 12) comments that that holding in, practised on a regular basis, will be expressed in chronic body tensions.

TECHNIQUES

Gestalt therapy seeks for client awareness in the present. Awareness in the present is curative⁹ because such awareness can reinstate the need-fulfilment pattern that has been interrupted. Awareness comes through confrontation and [human] encounter which leads to growth. Growth, as in Rogers, is what overcomes problems.

⁸ We need to distinguish between the feeling of anger and the behaviour that might go with it. Despite what is often said, feelings and emotions are subject to moral norms too. For example, the feeling of being sexually aroused by violence is not good. That feeling has been developed over a period of time in a number of evil contexts. That aberrant feeling requires healing for a more normal emotion reaction to be experienced.

⁹ An extension of a psychodynamic idea.

Levitsky and Perls (1970: 140) speak of the 'rules and games of Gestalt therapy'. The rules are such principles as 1) *The Now*, 2) *I and thou*, 3) *'It' language* and *'I' language*, 4) *Use of the awareness continuum*, 5) *No gossiping*, and 6) *Changing questions into statements*.

1. The Now

Corey summarises Perls's views about time with the revealing words, 'the past is gone and the future has not yet arrived, only the present is significant' (Corey, 1996: 223). Gestalt does not try to find out what happened in the past but will encourage the CT to speak to that person, now, here in the present. Fritz is famous for using the 'two-chair' technique to promote this meeting¹⁰ in the now. The therapist works with the idea of the figure-ground and its connection with need fulfilment.

What is the CT doing to prevent clear, unambiguous 'figures' to emerge so that needs are met?

2. I and thou

CT is made aware that her communications are to someone. Address that person. Don't just speak without identifying the one you are addressing.

3. It language versus I-language

Therapist asks what do you feel in your eye? CT answers, 'It is blinking'. What do you feel in your throat? It is choked. Therapists asks CT to change his language so that he says, 'I am blinking my eye'. 'I am choking'.

If CTs say, 'I can't do that'. Therapist asks them to say, 'I won't do that!' Perls has no problem with their saying, I won't do that! He simply wants them to be aware that they have choices and that they made a choice not to do it.

¹⁰ Laura Perls did not use this approach at all.

4. Awareness Continuum

This rule is vital to Gestalt. Hence, 'What are you aware of now?' is a frequently asked question. Gestalt is focussed on a return to the senses, a return to sensory experience which we usually ignore or downgrade. Sometimes, the CT will be invited to become his eyes or his throat or whatever is in focus and conduct a dialogue with that part of himself.

5. No gossiping

If the CT says that Mary is always making me feel angry then the Gestaltist says, 'Tell Mary that directly here'.

6. Changing questions into statements

CTs will ask questions about what is happening which can be avoidance of taking responsibility for themselves. (Perls believed that CTs were essentially manipulative and were always seeking to get support from the environment [him] that they were quite capable of providing for themselves.) CTs do need support but support comes in the form of therapists' questions such as, 'Are you aware that.....?' and 'What is happening for you right now?'

The 'games' of Gestalt therapy are close to the notion of techniques.

7. Games

a) dialogue

This technique can be used when a polarity is identified. A classic polarity is known as 'top-dog/under-dog': top-dog¹¹ is bossy, condemning and judging. 'You should do this!', it says, and 'You should not do that!' The under-dog is passive, excuse-making, whining and a saboteur! CT is invited to role-play each side of the polarity (rather than talking *about* the dilemma). By so doing, Perls hoped that the two sides would be drawn closer together and that their extremeness would be reduced. This process would result in less pain for the CT. Other polarities can also be handled in this same way: aggression/passivity; nice/nasty; and with parts of the body such as right and left hands if appropriate.

¹¹ The Freudian superego.

b) doing the rounds

Perls usually did Gestalt in groups with one person working and others watching on. He used this arrangement to save money and time. He also used this organisation with seasoned therapists in training sessions. The 'CT' might say, 'I can't stand anyone in this room'. He might get the person to say those words to each person in the group ['doing the rounds'] and to say something about his/her feelings about each person.

c) unfinished business (=unresolved feelings)

One of the classic expressions of Gestalt therapy that may involve talking to a parent that the CT feels resentment for. (Perls regarded resentments as being a prime example of unfinished business.)

d) I have a secret

Each person in the group thinks of a well-guarded secret s/he has. Each is instructed *not* to share this secret but to imagine how others in the group would react to the secret on hearing about it.

e) playing the projections

If a person were to say, 'I can't trust you', the person may be invited to role-play an untrustworthy person. Perls' notion is that much of what people say is about themselves, about inner conflicts they have between, in this case, trustworthiness and untrustworthiness.

f) one last request

When unpleasant feelings are encountered in these exercises or processes Perls will often ask CT, 'Can you stay with that feeling?' Often, the CT's fantasies will become apparent if she remains with the undesirable feeling. Typically, Perls believes that when we can experience the difference between a perception ('a woman hurt me in the past') and a fantasy ('all women are out to hurt me') then the *yuk* feeling of rejection is experienced differently.

8. Dreams

Dreams are important in Gestalt therapy but Perls did not try to interpret them (Perls, 1970: 204). He believes the dream is, not so much 'the royal road to the unconscious' as did Freud, but the 'royal road to integration' (p. 204). What he does is to get the dreamer to sensorily experience, to see the dream again, not just to remember it. The

person becomes part of the scene and begins to direct what happens. The dreamer begins to have strong feelings about what is taking place, begins to express things to various beings or objects in the dream.

Perls seems to believe that the dream reveals certain aspects of ourselves that are as yet not fully integrated. Therefore, 'dreamwork' can promote greater resolution of polarities.

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