Gestalt Therapy: roots and influences

Dr Esther Walker

Introduction

In 1951 Frederick Perls, Ralph Hefferline and Paul Goodman published *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* and, in doing so, put Gestalt therapy (henceforth GT) on the world map. Shortly afterwards, the Gestalt Institutes of New York and Cleveland were founded and, since then, GT has developed into a complete theory of psychotherapy and a philosophy for living (Bowman & Nevis 2005).

The ideas presented in the book represented a radical departure from the prevailing orthodox view of how human distress should be understood and addressed. This is evident in the authors’ description of the role of the therapist within GT. Psychoanalysis, the dominant theory of the day, involved a therapist applying knowledge to interpret the patient and, in so doing, to educate them. In contrast, Perls, Hefferline and Goodman asserted that:

“What is essential is not that the therapist learn something about the patient and then teach it to him, but that the therapist teach the patient how to learn about himself *(op cit pp15-16).*”

Although GT has firm roots in Freudian psychoanalysis it draws on a diverse range of creative, philosophical and scientific disciplines to provide an existential-phenomenological approach which is experiential and experimental (Bowman & Nevis 2005). Bowman (1998) provides a comprehensive definition:

“Gestalt therapy is a process psychotherapy with the goal of improving one’s contact in community and with the environment in general. This goal is accomplished through aware, spontaneous and authentic dialogue between client and therapist. Awareness of differences and similarities (is) encouraged while interruptions to contact are explored in the present therapeutic relationship (cited in Bowman & Nevis *op cit* p 10).”

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It was Fritz and Laura Perls who, through their education, training, life experience and relationships, were pivotal in drawing these theories and ideas together into an “adventure in living” (ibid 1951 p 15).

**Psychoanalysis**

Freud (1856-1939) provided a rationale for human distress (or neurosis), identifying that experiences in childhood influence adult behaviour. His ideas revolutionised the way we make sense of the human psyche, introducing to us concepts and theories which have become fundamental: the ‘unconscious’ (The Interpretation of Dreams, 1899), the Ego/Id dynamic (The Ego and the Id, 1923), ‘transference’ (The Dynamics of Transference 1912), The Oedipus complex, the ‘Freudian slip’ (The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, 1901).

Fritz (1893-1970) and Laura (1905-1990) Perls came to psychoanalysis from different theoretical perspectives (Fritz from neuropsychology and Laura from gestalt psychology). They trained as psychoanalysts and ran successful practices in Germany, South Africa and USA. Through the development of their work (both together and apart) they modified, rejected and added to Freud’s ideas, incorporating them into GT (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993). However, until the 1940s they continued to regard their emerging therapeutic theory as a continuation of Freudian psychoanalysis and were still referring to themselves as ‘psychoanalysts’ up until the publication of Gestalt Therapy in 1951 (Rosenfeld 1978).

Fundamental to Freudian psychoanalysis was the belief that psychological blockages were rooted in the child’s anal development. The Perls’ offered a counter view, that such blockages were in fact oral in nature. They presented their ideas about ‘Oral Resistances’ (later published as Ego, Hunger and Aggression in 1947) in a paper at the International Psychoanalytic Conference in Czechoslovakia in 1935. This paper was received with considerable hostility. Soon after (in 1936), the International Psychoanalytic Association withdrew their licence to train.

Fritz and Laura were both heavily influenced by psychoanalysis and, in particular, by those analyst colleagues (the *renegade analysts* like Wilhelm Reich) who were breaking away from the orthodox position that Freud vigorously protected (Clarkson & Mackewn, *op cit*). For example, Wilhelm Reich (whom Fritz was in analysis with) contended that the repression of life energy (in the form of emotional blocks) has a physical manifestation. His ideas about ‘character armour’ and self-organismic regulation became founding principles within GT (Bowman & Nevis *op cit*).
However, Fritz’s relationship to psychoanalysis appears to have involved a more personal struggle than did Laura’s. She states that:

“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 op cit).”

Hence, their rejection by the International Psychoanalytic Association hit Fritz hard and, from 1936 onwards, he became increasingly aggressive towards Freud and psychoanalysis (Clarkson & Mackewn, op cit).

**Gestalt psychology, holism and Field Theory**

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An important part of the *zeitgeist* of the time (of the development of GT) was the move from atomism to holism. Gestalt psychology was founded by Max Wertheimer through his publication in 1912 “*Experimental Studies of the Perception of Movement*” (see also “Productive Thinking” which was published posthumously in 1959). ‘Gestalt’ means a unified or meaningful whole. Gestalt psychology challenged the prevailing approach to psychological study which was to deconstruct and focus on small bits (molecularism).

The theory proposes that how we make sense of the world is not merely a sum of the sensory information we get. Our brains are wired to identify patterns according to a number of organising principles (called *gestalt laws*) (Boeree, 2000). One of these laws is the law of similarity: we tend to group objects together that we recognise as similar. In the figure above (*ibid*), for example, rather than seeing a collection of ‘X’ and ‘O’ shapes, we see the ‘O’s as forming a gestalt within a larger form (of ‘Y’s) (*ibid*).
This figure also helps to illustrate the gestalt psychology principle of ‘figure/ground’ which became fundamental to GT. According to this principle we have an innate tendency to perceive one aspect of an event as foreground (figure) against all other aspects of that event which become background (ground). This provides our way of managing the overwhelming amount of sensory information that the world makes available to us.

Laura Perls had a PhD in Gestalt psychology and spent many years doing experimental work with the gestalt psychologist Kurt Goldstein (Fritz also worked with him for a few months). But both Laura and Fritz were influenced by holistic ideas from a number of different sources, for example the work of Jan Smuts (Holism and Evolution 1926) and the work of Kurt Lewin.

Kurt Lewin took the discoveries of the Gestalt psychologists about perception and applied them to real life and human relationships (in the process establishing social psychology as a discipline). He developed a theory that the individual organises her environment (the field) according to her own dominant interests or needs (to create a figure).

Perls assimilated holistic ideas like these into his holistic field theory according to which a person’s behaviour can only be understood in the context in which it occurs:

“Understanding of human behaviour needs to begin with a sense of the situation or field as a whole and only then proceed to differentiation of the component parts (Clarkson & Mackewn op cit p 42).”

Their development of a holistic approach to psychotherapeutic process was also the result of Fritz and Laura Perls’ experience of and interest in the creative arts. Laura was a dancer from her early years and Fritz became acquainted with expressionist dance while he was in Berlin in the early 1920s. Both Fritz and Laura were drawn to dance and movement as a way of expressing oneself spontaneously and creatively (ibid).

Fritz had a life-long interest in acting and the theatre. He met and studied with the director Max Reinhardt who stressed the importance of observing how people express emotion through tone of voice and gesture. Fritz recognised from this experience the need to attend not just to what a person says but how they say it. From this early work with Reinhardt, Fritz developed a considerable ability to ‘read’ a person’s psychology from
how they present physically *(ibid)*. Later (in the 1960s), Perls became influenced very much by psychodrama (developed by Jacob Moreno) in his practice as a gestalt psychotherapist *(ibid)*.

In her interview with Edward Rosenfield (1978) Laura describes GT as a *holistic therapy*. It takes the total organism into account in order that the person may 'recover their self' (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman *op cit* p x).

**Philosophical influences: Existentialism, Phenomenology and Eastern thought**

Fritz Perls criticised Freudian psychoanalysis as being full of good ideas but lacking philosophical and methodological foundations (Clarkson & Mackewn *op cit*). Within GT, on the other hand, Fritz and Laura Perls integrated scientific developments such as gestalt psychology and field theory, with philosophical ideas and values (Bowman & Nevis *op cit*).

Laura’s academic training had strong philosophical foundations: she was very familiar with both existentialist and phenomenological philosophies. She studied Husserl’s work on phenomenological methods. From a phenomenological approach, there is no objective, undisputed truth because meaning in the world is open to different interpretations. Laura also met the existentialist Martin Buber and worked with Paul Tillich for some years.

According to Clarkson & Mackewn (*op cit*) Laura probably introduced Fritz to the existential concepts of freedom, authenticity, responsibility and anxiety (although Paul Goodman was also well versed in philosophy). Freedom, within existentialism, refers to the fact that there are no structures inhibiting our choices and actions. We are responsible for who we are and what we do. This responsibility is very frightening and we use blame and perceived obligation to others to create restrictions on our freedom. Living authentically (with integrity) means facing up to the fact that we are free to choose and yet are condemned to die; to live with such integrity means to live with anxiety (which is a natural response to our existential state) *(ibid)*.

Buber’s philosophy (described in *I and Thou* 1923) provided GT with its concepts of presence, authenticity, dialogue and inclusion. It has been argued that Buber’s work was *the* most important influence on GT (Bowman & Nevis *op cit* p 12).

Such an existential-phenomenological view of the world provides the philosophical foundation and the value base of GT.
However, GT is also influenced by Eastern philosophy and religion which was fashionable for intellectuals in the 1940s (ibid). Fritz was introduced to Eastern thought by Paul Weisz who was a student of Zen and who later trained with Fritz and Laura in GT. Fritz enjoyed the non-moral attitude of Zen as an antidote to what he called the ‘shouldistic’ behaviour. The Zen idea of ‘mindfulness’ was similar to Fritz’ idea of ‘present awareness’. The Zen idea of paradox was similar to Fritz’ idea that change can only occur when you give up trying to be someone else and instead accept who you really are. He went on to study Zen in Japan and continued to integrate Zen concepts and paradoxes into his teachings (Clarkson & Mackewn op cit).

Fritz and Laura brought together a range of philosophical ideas into GT. A more obscure influence on Fritz was Salomo Friedlander. Friedlander’s philosophy “contributed to a method of integrating polarities, the concept of the ‘fertile void,’ and a more thorough understanding of the emergent gestalt (Bowman & Nevis op cit p11).”

**Social upheavals: war, Fascism and anarchy**

During the First World War Fritz had a traumatic time serving as a young medic in the German army. Then, with the rise of Fascism in the early 1930s, Fritz and Laura Perls were forced to flee Germany for Holland and then, finding it hard to earn a living there, for South Africa in 1934. During Hitler’s persecution of Jewish, Gypsy and other ‘undesirable’ communities across Europe, the Perls lost many friends, family members and colleagues. These experiences of loss, death and exile amidst such social destruction had a devastating affect on both Fritz and Laura. It encouraged their determination to increase human potential by continuously challenging prevailing orthodoxy and tradition (Clarkson & Mackewn op cit).

This challenge was aided by the relationship they formed with the social philosopher Paul Goodman when they moved to America in 1948. Goodman had written an article about Wilhelm Reich in 1945 and Fritz was keen to meet him. Goodman was attracted to anarchy as the basis for community. His desire to accept and express all parts of himself and Fritz’ natural subversiveness led to a willingness to question moral and psychological assumptions and to behave without inhibition (ibid). This attitude to life helped to create the *zeitgeist* out of which GT developed.
Conclusion

It is a challenge to write an essay about the philosophical, scientific and creative ideas that were brought together in GT because everything appears to connect, at some point, with everything else (much like a gestalt perhaps). The constant factor that does move in a linear way I suppose is Fritz and Laura Perls who travelled through life experiencing, gathering and encountering so many events, people and ideas that became significant to them in their development of GT. It appears to have been their intellectual thirst and their energetic pursuit of the realisation of human potential that pulled GT out of the zeitgeist.

As a result of its guiding principles, GT can never be ‘owned’ by two people (in the way that orthodox psychoanalysis could be ‘owned’ by Freud) no matter how influential they were in its creation. Each therapist will bring her own experience, education, personal penchants to the process and thereby make it her own.

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