

The Historical Roots of Gestalt Therapy Theory

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The theory of Gestalt therapy is itself a new Gestalt, though it does not contain many new thoughts. What its founders, Fritz and Laura Perls and Paul Goodman, did was to weave a new synthesis out of existing concepts.

The background of this new Gestalt is composed of concepts and elements from different bodies of knowledge and disciplines.

I would like to give you an idea of the cultural and historical situation that is the Zeitgeist (the spirit of the time) that prevailed during the lifetimes of the founders of Gestalt therapy.

What kind of theories and traditions did Fritz and Laura come into contact with? Where did they find ideas that were in line with their own, what other ideas did they reject in their search for answers to the fundamental questions that are either implicitly or explicitly contained in every theory of psychotherapy?

What is a human being? How does he or she function? Why do we exist? Is there a reason to exist? How should we behave toward each other? How does psychological illness develop?

Firstly the background: the wider field, an overview of the Zeitgeist. In the second part, I will present the various contacts Fritz and Laura Perls had with specific persons and their ideas or theoretical models.

The beginning of the 20th century was characterized by an explosive development of science and technology. The era of automation and cybernetics had begun. The rise of nuclear and quantum physics led to radical revolutionary change. Biology, chemistry and medicine also began to make rapid progress. Revolutionary elements emerged in political thinking. Socialism, Marxism and also anarchism grew into sizeable movements.

In a similar manner to the changes in science, a search also began in arts and literature for new forms of expression. Expressionism at this time represented a reaction to the old, outdated bourgeois norms and the naive belief in progress. The catastrophes brought about by the First World War, the destruction of humanity, were only too evident and too recent. Expressionists (for example painters/artists Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Munch and Otto Dix, who incidentally painted a portrait of Fritz Perls) were trying to create a new vision of the human being, one determined by social responsibility and compassion for others. Creative art was seen as evolving out of immediate inner experiencing and emotional dynamics. The basic themes of expressionism were feeling, intuition, subjectivity, fantasy -- themes that live on in Gestalt therapy.

In philosophy, a counter movement with a tendency toward materialism followed the German Idealism of the 19th century. Revolutionary ideas were developed by Marx. The phenomena of self-alienation and self-realization were discussed. The human being was no longer seen as an abstract being but within his/her concrete societal environment Marx saw the individual above all as a working being, a part of the work environment or workforce.

The 20th century also saw the emergence of new trends in the humanities and philosophy. Not only did the individual natural sciences have a strong influence; the arts and literature also made distinctive impact on philosophy. There was a characteristic mutual influencing between the different disciplines, sometimes manifesting within one and the same person, i.e., philosopher and writer (Sartre and Ortega Y Gasset), philosopher and mathematician (Bertrand Russell and Alfred N. Whitehead). Another example is the revolution brought about by Freud's discovery of the unconscious, and his empirical proof of what Schopenhauer and Nietzsche had already grasped intuitively. Language became a topic of central importance within philosophy, known as the "linguistic turn" (Wittgenstein). The philosophers of life, the Lebensphilosophie, the most influential of whom was the Frenchman Henri Bergson, saw reality as a becoming. For them, there is in fact only becoming, acting and action (élan vital). The ground for the most well known existentialist philosophy was prepared by Franz Brentano. Edmund Husserl, a student of Brentano, founded phenomenology, thus also becoming an influential philosopher of the times. His aim was to get to grips with the consciousness that contains and comprises the entire horizon of the world and the meaning of all known objects. Existential philosophy, which began with Kierkegaard and was further developed by Gabriel Marcel and Merleau-Ponty, focuses on existence as "individual human existence," and issues related to the meaning of human existence, freedom, destiny and the existence of God.

The existential philosophers focus on the individual and are in their methodology more or less phenomenologists. Their main concern is the immediate grasp of being (what is), to meet human beings in their respective situation, where they are connected to the world and other human beings. Existence is "potentially being" (Sein-können), being constantly confronted with choices, constantly having to make decisions. Existence is free and realizes itself only in the doing. Thus the basic human experience is anxiety (M. Heidegger), existence (Dasein) is finite, it is Sein zum Tode (we live to die). The essential meaning of living arises with the encounter of death. Death challenges us to live our own lives in freedom and self-responsibility.

The second part of my overview is concerned with the contacts Fritz and Laura Perls and Paul Goodman had with others, and their concepts or ideas that significantly influenced the main writings of Gestalt therapy.

Berlin during the roaring "Golden Twenties" in the Weimarer Republic was exciting and turbulent. This was a time in which the Leitmotiv was a creative and social utopia. Fritz Perls worked as an actor and met Max Reinhard at the "Deutsches Theater." He described **Max Reinhard** in his autobiography as "the first genius he ever met." His emphasis on nonverbal communication influenced Perls strongly. At the same time **Moreno**, the founder of Psychodrama, was staging expressionistic experiments in the theater. Perls, who later met Moreno in 1947 in the USA, adopted essential elements of his approach such as roleplay and the "empty chair" technique, that Moreno himself had taken from drama and modified for use as therapeutic techniques. The expressionist impulses of this time are still discernible in both Psychodrama and Gestalt therapy. The theories of both these schools of therapy refer to notions such as spontaneity, creativity, and intuition as they were developed by the Lebensphilosophen, especially Henry Bergson. For Bergson, life was an ongoing creative process carried by the élan vital (vital impulse).

In Berlin, Fritz Perls had frequented left-wing intellectual circles and also moved in Bauhaus circles. There he met the expressionist philosopher **Salomon Friedlander**, whose central philosophical motive gave Perls orientation in these times of confusion. Perls emphasized that Freud's Psychoanalysis and Friedlander's philosophy with the concept of "creative indifference" were his main spiritual sources. The point of creative indifference or void or point of balance is a point from which the differentiation into opposites takes place, since all existing things are determined by polarities.

The basic assumption is that the split that man creates in the world through his consciousness, which he experiences as inevitable and painful, i.e., the separation between me and the world, between subject and object, is merely an illusion. This can only be abolished by understanding the world from a zero point, the no-thing of the world, the absolute, the creator, the origin. The zero point is the condition of the possibility of difference. In modern terms: I make the difference that makes the difference. The world is an action of the I (“The miller only hears his mill when it stands still” or “we only sense what contrasts in some way”). Perls regarded Friedlander’s philosophy as the western equivalent to the teachings of Lao-tse. In Gestalt psychology and in Goldstein’s organismic theory Perls found a terminology that corresponds to Friedlander’s basic theses: the concept of homeostasis, top dog and under dog, contact and withdrawal, figure and ground.

Fritz and Laura Perls had undergone psychoanalytic training first in Berlin and later in Frankfurt and Vienna. Fritz started with **Karen Horney** and then went on to **Wilhelm Reich**, while **Frieda Fromm-Reichmann** was one of Laura’s training analysts.

Despite the criticism of Freud’s and the later revision of psychoanalysis, we see their influence in the theory of Gestalt therapy. Recently, there has been an interest in similarities and especially their practical application more than the differences at the metaphysical level. In spite of the fact that Freud failed to acknowledge Perls’ work, Perls himself considered Freud’s discoveries extremely valuable.

From Karen Horney and Wilhelm Reich, Perls adopted a less detached and more active therapeutic stance as well as their environment-oriented view of the genesis of neurosis. Perls shared with Karen Horney the mutual roots of the Bohemian Berlin area as well a passion for the theater and a holistic view in therapy that led them both to work with the patient as a whole person and to the study of Zen-Buddhism. With Reich, Perls later experiences a breath and body oriented approach and differentiated method of working on resistance. Attention is given to the stylistic components of communication (mime, gesture, body language) as the elucidator of the patient’s resistances. The focus on “how” rather than “why” in the therapeutic process is also a Reichian emphasis. Many similarities can also be found in their socio-political leanings.

Among the psychoanalysts who had a STRONG influence on Gestalt therapy, **Otto Rank** deserves special mention. Otto Rank was an early student of Freud’s. He began a new line in psychoanalysis with his work “The Trauma of Birth.” In this book he questioned the Oedipus theory and presents the trauma of birth to be the paradigm of the psychological process of individuation. Rank’s therapy is centered on the will and the ego-functions as an autonomous organizing force inside the individual. He demands re-experiencing and repeating instead of remembering, which inevitably implies an active role of the therapist. For Rank, therapy is the reestablishment of meaning in the “here and now.” Here we find many elements that were later included in Gestalt therapy.

Fritz and Laura met in Frankfurt, where she was studying psychology and philosophy and had close contacts with Gestalt psychologists. Here Fritz Perls also became acquainted with the basic discoveries of Gestalt psychology, which he later integrated into Gestalt therapy.

The term “Gestalt” was originally coined by the Viennese **Graf Christian von Ehrenfels**. For him, a Gestalt was a psychical whole formed by the structuring of the perceptual field. For scientific thinking, the revolutionary potential lay in the statement, that it is not the analysis of the underlying elements that makes it possible to gain knowledge. Further and finer analysis or dissection into elements not only fails to bring about an increase in knowledge but even makes it impossible. Rather, our consciousness forms the units of wholes, Gestalten.

Ehrenfels' statement that we perceive wholes and that the whole is different from the sum of its parts was worked on and further differentiated by the Berlin school of Gestalt psychology into the Gestalt dictum: "the whole precedes the parts, and Gestalt formation is a primary characteristic of organismic functioning and also of the individual movement toward closure/satisfaction to return to a state of equilibrium." The leading figures were **Wertheimer**, **Koffka**, and **Kohler**. The important question, as to whether it is the subject's own interests or another subjective impulse (urge), or a criterion in the environment that organizes specific forms out of the field, was not answered until **Kurt Lewin** formulated this concept. Lewin took the Gestalt model out of the laboratory and transferred it to the complex realm of everyday situations. His thesis was that the need organizes the perception of the field and the acting in the field. He considered human activity as interactive and at least partly a reaction to the perceived conditions of the field. He emphasized the dynamic interrelatedness of the elements in a field. More aspects of Lewin's work and his assistant Bluma Zeigarnik should later be of importance for Gestalt therapy is the concept of unfinished business. Bluma Zeigarnik found out that unfinished actions or situations are better memorized than finished ones on the background of the inner psychic tension system (known as the Zeigarnik effect). Gestalt therapy was later thus named after Gestalt psychology to draw attention to indicating the significant links between both.

While Fritz Perls was in Frankfurt, he worked with **Goldstein**, who was conducting research on brain damaged soldiers. Besides working as a medical doctor, Goldstein gave lectures on philosophical topics, reading Heidegger and Schemer with his students, one of whom was Laura Perls.

Goldstein applied the academic studies of the Gestalt psychologists to living human beings and considered the human being as a whole organism. He expanded Gestalt psychology as a study of perception, to Gestalt psychology as a study of the whole person. Working with his patients he used the phenomenological method and a holistic perspective. His assumptions are known as the organismic theory which had a profound influence on Perls, who also adopted Goldstein's understanding of anxiety as an existential fact.

The concept of the whole was also taken up by **Jan Smuts** in Holism and Evolution. His book was read enthusiastically by Goldstein's assistants. Smuts considers the organism to be a self-regulating entity: "the holistic organism contains its past and much of its future in its present" (cited in Petzold). Furthermore: "as metabolism and assimilation are fundamental functions of all organic wholes." Here we find the basic premise on which Gestalt Therapy rests: holism. This is quoted almost word for word in Perls first book Ego, Hunger and Aggression. Gestalt therapy then became a philosophy of life based on this holistic epistemology.

While in Frankfurt, Laura Perls (nee Lore Posner) developed a strong interest in the existential philosophers. She became personally acquainted with **Martin Buber** and **Paul Tillich**, greatly enjoying their lectures. The basic messages and concepts of existential philosophy and their phenomenological method became the philosophical foundation of Gestalt therapy.

The phenomenological method derives from **Edmund Husserl**. His view was that philosophy should not study the universe scientifically but should consider the human being itself from the inside, the consciousness itself and its structure, how it is that objects are experienced and present themselves to the consciousness. He also pointed out that consciousness is always consciousness of something, that is, it is always directed to the real world in an attempt to interpret it meaningfully. The significant thesis introduced by Husserl was that consciousness is prejudged, in other words, it is "intentional." We experience something "in some way." Husserl tried to grasp the intra-psychic, the performance of the consciousness, purely. By the phenomenological reduction he tried to reduce the intra-psychic to the purely subjective, to subjectivity, and set aside (epoché) the objective, i.e., that what appears

to me is only the phenomenon, pure consciousness, pure experience. Husserl found the key to free the subjectivity by this method. When one loses one's illusion about oneself, one finds oneself responsible for what one has assumed to be "objective." There is no object without subject, no world without a self, no being without a self.

This method was applied to different fields, especially to psychotherapy. Basic premise of the existential philosophers on existence is his "being in the world" (In-der-Welt-Sein) and always being with others (Mit-anderen-Sein).

Martin Heidegger was also an existential philosopher, who developed the idea that a person is a possibility or a potential. He is thrown into the world, is free to choose among all possibilities from moment to moment. Through these choices one constructs oneself. The potential of freedom confronts us with anxiety. This is already an essential assumption of **Kierkegaard's**. He described it as the greatest existential problem, experienced as ambivalent anxiety. In determining our actions and acknowledging this we are authentic beings. Freedom of thought and belief leads to subjective responsibility.

In line with this understanding and the theory of **Gabriel Marcel** the self defines itself through contact with others. This concept is close to Martin Buber's understanding of the I-Thou relationship. For Buber, being is also fundamentally twofold: there is no I without a "Thou" or "It."

Buber no longer views being as derived from the self, but as a "between." The fundamental fact of human existence is the human being with the human being, i.e., a person is always in relation to some-thing, or some-body. In Buber's anthropology, communication is what makes human beings, human beings. Genuine dialogue begins when the I enters into the presence of the Thou.

The central concept of Gestalt therapy is the self as a system of contacts. Here the self in the middle mode, both active and passive, is consistent with Buber's understanding. Buber and later Perls emphasized autonomy, freedom, address and response (Anrede und Antwort) constituting the genuine dialogue. Whereas Buber considered the principle of "I and Thou" as an end in itself, Perls sometimes viewed it as a means to an end. The patient-therapist relation as it is seen in Gestalt therapy draws heavily upon Buber's understanding, thus making a shift from transference, to contact and dialogue. Gabriel Marcel and **Merleau Ponty** place similar emphasis on the inter-human relationship as inter-subjectivity, as a horizontal relation with the co-subjective (Mitsubjekt). There are many parallels and similarities between the ideas of Buber and Marcel.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the influence of **Paul Goodman**. Goodman had a broad education in many different fields. He took a stand on many social and political issues of his time. Fritz and Laura Perls were familiar with Goodman's work before they actually met him and hired him as coauthor for their basic text on Gestalt therapy. His ideas were similar to those of Gustav Landauer, who was a close friend of Buber's. Landauer was also actively involved in revolutionary politics (Münchener Räterepublik). Like Goodman he saw anarchy as a state without rule. The idea of communal, self-organizing power sharing later appeared in Fritz Perls' Kibbutz idea. Goodman was also in search of a non-Marxist alternative for consumer capitalism. His most important maxim was the unfolding of the personal idiosyncrasy, personal responsibility, mutual support and, if necessary, the refusal of obedience. He, like Perls, was a follower of the Freudian psychoanalysis and also one of the early critics of Freud's work. He contributed an important part of the theory of Gestalt therapy.

Almost all "forefathers and foremothers" of the Gestalt concept had studied Eastern philosophy or mysticism, especially Taoism and Zen-Buddhism. The awareness concept has drawn upon various aspects of Eastern thinking.

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This article originally appeared in the November, 1996, issue of *Gestalt Dialogue: Newsletter for the Integrative Gestalt Centre*, 275 Fifield Terrace, Christchurch 8002, Aotearoa, New Zealand.
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