

## AGGRESSION

**aggression:** **Fritz Perls:** the biological force or energy present in everything done by an individual to initiate contact with the environment; **Staemmler:** a hostile or violent process, usually involving anger or rage, the goal of which is to demean or harm another.

### Discussion:

**Perls** saw aggression as a healthy force in human life and growth. Creation and destruction were viewed as complementary aspects of healthy aggression. Chopping off pieces of a stone is necessary to create a sculpture. Burning wood is required to make a fire. In therapy, this could involve breaking down rigid patterns of behavior or overly narrowed boundaries of the self, to help a client become more flexible and whole. The concepts of dental aggression and mental metabolism are Perls's metaphors for his understanding of the process of healthy aggression in therapy.

**Healthy aggression**, according to Perls, consists of active direct engagement, learning by doing, initiative, assertiveness, self-regulation, drive, forcefulness, persistence, creativity, curiosity, and inquisitiveness. Kepner sees it as standing up for and defending oneself, or confronting an aggressor, such as an abuser. (Kepner, 1995, p. 107, F. Perls, 1947, PH&G, 1951, L. Perls, 1992, Ch. 3)

**Dental aggression** is described by Perls, on the biological level, as tasting, biting, chewing, swallowing, destroying, digesting, and assimilating good food and spitting out or vomiting up harmful or unwanted food. He described these actions as necessary aggressive (destructive) processes for the life, health, and growth of an organism. (1947/1992, pp. 189-191)

**Mental metabolism** is Perls' parallel metaphor for the cognitive process of critical thinking about the behaviors, ideas, beliefs, or values (*introjects*), taken in uncritically ("swallowed whole") from family, religion, or society. A common message is "Big boys don't cry." When individuals feel conflicted about these messages, they must bring up (regurgitate) and evaluate (taste, bite, and chew) these sayings, in order to judge what is beneficial or harmful in them for their authentic way of being. What is helpful is then taken in and assimilated as part of themselves, (swallowed and digested), and what is harmful is rejected, (vomited or spit out). (1947/1992, Part II)

Perls does admit that there is an "anti-social" aspect to aggression (1951/1990, Ch. 8), as illustrated in the following examples:

**Displaced aggression** is aggression turned against oneself or projected onto others, instead of its real target. The inability to act aggressively toward the right target can be due to

internal factors, such as fear, shame, dependency, or physical weakness; or to external ones, such as threatening, dangerous, or totally controlling environments.

- **Self-aggression** can be carried out through repression, retroflection, masochism, shame, self-hatred, self-injury, self-punishment, or suicide.

- **Projected aggression** is seen in paranoia, sadism, and murder, often carried out by collective socially sanctioned violence, such as witch-hunts, genocide, terrorism, and war. Historical examples include the Spanish Inquisition, McCarthyism, Nazism, and the more recent conflicts between Islamic Fundamentalism and the West. An everyday example is when a boss criticizes a worker, who then goes home and fights with his wife, who yells at their child, who kicks the dog.

Although displaced aggression often takes a destructive form, such as suicide or war, it can also serve a protective function. An abused child may hold back aggressive feelings against his abuser and blame himself for what has happened, in order to prevent further harm. An angry person may punch a pillow or a wall, rather than hitting someone with whom he or she is angry.

**Frank Staemmler**, in his recent book, *Aggression, Time, and Understanding*, challenges Perls' concept of healthy aggression. (2009a, Section 1) He points out that, in contemporary psychology, aggression is *only a hostile* process, usually involving anger or rage. Its goal is to demean, harm, or annihilate another. What Perls characterizes as "positive" aggression, Staemmler sees as an entirely different category of behavior and motivation, having to do with assertiveness, curiosity, exploring, building, learning, mastering, etc., a positive process of attraction to and involvement in an activity of interest. Its goal is "to attain one's own goal or safeguard one's rights without harming or belittling another person." (2009a, p. 39) Staemmler thinks it is a misleading confusion of terms to call this category of behavior a form of aggression.

Staemmler finds dangerous Perls' encouragement of the expression of anger and aggression in the punching of pillows or yelling aggressively at the other in an "empty chair." (See second Fritz Perls quote below). Current research has shown that expressing aroused anger and aggression does not lead to catharsis. It actually increases rather than decreases subsequent aggression. (2009a, pp. 62-67)

Staemmler points out how Perls' work with clients in expressing anger and aggression was very individualistic, only for the benefit of the aggressor's needs and not taking into account the other in the situation. As he says, "By no means can it be reconciled with Buber's notion of 'I-Thou.'" (2009a, p. 30) Yontef also stresses that it must be done with concern for both the self and the other and with awareness of the consequences of the behavior. (Yontef, 1993b, p. 414)

Another point Staemmler brings up is the negative physical, social, and mental effects of aggression on the aggressor. (2009a, pp. 45-62) The aggressive "Type A" personality suffers from a higher rate of hypertension, angina pectoris, and heart attack than others. Aggressive behavior can lead to social isolation and rejection. Soldiers who have killed and experienced the traumatic effects of combat come home with PTSD, depression, and gnawing

questions about their own moral character, after having done terrible things they never thought they would allow themselves to do.

Staemmler does make one exception to his rule against the expression of aggression and anger, which is when the client has so suppressed his anger that he is not aware of it anymore. In that situation, he would want to bring the client's anger to awareness and expression, but "only as a necessary precondition for subsequent therapeutic efforts to help the client not to activate those feelings anymore in the first place. ... Because of the widely spread (false) belief in our culture that it is health-promoting to vent one's anger... , the therapist needs to take care that the client does not misunderstand this intermediate step as the solution of his problem." (2009a, p. 91)

What he does recommend as an appropriate way to deal therapeutically with anger and aggression comes from *appraisal theory*, which has to do with how "...feelings are evoked by certain evaluations of situations and events." [See Section One, Part Three of his book for a thorough discussion of this approach. (2009a, pp. 92-164)]

### **Illustrative Quotations:**

• **Laura Perls:** "Every overt sign of aggression in the small child (crying, kicking, biting, breaking things) is met by the grown-ups with disapproval [and] often...severe punishment. ...The child is told to be good-natured, obedient, respectful." ... "...most people regard [aggression] as undesirable and try to break the child's will. ...suppressing his so-called 'naughtiness,' ...but also suppressing his curiosity and inquisitiveness. ...[which] are indispensable...for the child's intellectual development, his capacity to learn and study, to understand people and circumstances. ...complete suppression...leads to the impossibility of critical thinking. ...The parents' demand for respect implies that the child should not question the grown ups, that one should do as one is told, that one should believe what one is taught." "Aggression not only makes us attack, it also makes us tackle things; it does not only destroy, it also builds up; it not only makes us steal and rob, it also lies behind our endeavors to take hold and to master what we have a right to." (1939/1992, pp. 38-39, 43)

• **Fritz Perls:** "With biting, chewing, and...locomotion and ability to approach, the child has the types of aggression available to him and under his control for his own growth. ...But if these are not used in the service of growth functions – as initiative, selection, overcoming of obstacles, seizing upon and destroying in order to assimilate – then the surplus energy finds discharge as displaced aggressions – domination, irritability, sadism, lust for power, suicide, murder, and their mass equivalent, war!" (PHG, 1951/1990, pp. 191-192)

• **Fritz Perls:** ["empty chair" exercise] "...visualize a person against whom you feel a grudge. Tell him exactly what you think of him. Let yourself go; be as emotional as you can; break his bloody neck; swear at him as you have never sworn before. Do not be afraid that this will become your character. On the contrary, this imaginary work will discharge much hostility, especially in cases of latent hostility, as, for instance, in a strained or estranged

marriage. It often works wonders! Instead of forcing you to be nice and to hide your irritability behind a mask of politeness, you clear the air." (in Staemmler, 2009a, pp. 15-16)

• **Fritz Perls:** " 'Destruction' has a wanton and anti-social connotation..., [but also] means 'taking apart for the purpose of putting together again in a better way'." "... 'aggression' ...[conventionally] means 'unprovoked attack'. But, while this specialized meaning dominates current usage of 'aggression' in everyday life, its broader meaning, ...includes everything that an organism does to initiate contact with the environment." (PHG, 1951/1990, pp. 69-70)

• **Latner:** "The formation of a Gestalt is an act of creation, its disappearance is an act of destruction, both are aggressive acts." (1973/1986, p. 25)

Last update: 12/18/12

Stephanie Sabar, MSW, LCSW  
Website: [stephaniesabar.com](http://stephaniesabar.com)