

PERLS-ISM

Perls-ism: “Perls-ism,” a word coined by James Dublin (1976), refers to the style of Gestalt therapy practiced by Fritz Perls, particularly when he was at Esalen from 1964-1969. His style included the use of the hot seat in demonstration workshops, confrontation and derision of “phoniness” (inauthenticity), anti-intellectualism, and an individualistic view of maturity as self-support and taking responsibility for oneself, which translated into his extremely non-supportive stance as a therapist.

Discussion:

Perls’ style reflected his penchant for theatrical behavior, his hunger for recognition and adulation, his need to control, and his difficulties with intimate and long-term personal relationships.

However, it was also his attempt to move away from what he considered the problems of psychoanalysis: overemphasis on theory, talking, and interpretation; lack of direct human contact; and looking to the past for the source of patients’ problems. His intention was to move people to think for and be themselves, rather than hiding fearfully behind defenses or accepting blindly the “shoulds” of unexamined family, social, or religious norms. Demystifying psychotherapy was another of his goals, taking it from the seclusion of the private office into public view, so that all could see how it is done and what it has to offer.

Perls had an amazing intuitive sensitivity to what was going on or missing in a participant’s life. He could quickly break through people’s defenses and bring them to an “aha” moment of self-awareness. This often led to the false impression that there could be an easy “instant cure.” He was not as interested in doing the hard long-term work required for the integration and assimilation of the new understanding. Without that work, the benefits of the momentary insight could easily be lost.

He also was very creative in developing pithy slogans, such as “Lose your mind and come to your senses,” and in using experiential experiments and techniques, such as the “empty chair.”

Perls’ dramatic and confrontational style, slogans, and techniques were often imitated and popularized by untrained people who mistakenly perceived them as the essence of Gestalt therapy. This contributed to a gross misunderstanding of the Gestalt approach and for many years tarnished Gestalt’s reputation as a serious and necessary development in the evolution of psychotherapy.

Perls was a man of many contradictions. He could destroy a person with a few words, yet he was also known to love and cry and laugh and play with others and to be experienced as a warm, respectful, and charming person. He would tell people to take responsibility for their own lives and then proceed to tell them exactly how *he* thought they should do it. He presented himself as being anti-theory and anti-intellectual. (This led, unfortunately, to there being a dearth of professional writing on Gestalt theory for many years.) Yet he himself wrote articles and books, and lectured on theoretical issues. What he really was against was intellectualization, rationalization, and authoritarian interpretation, not intelligence. Very early on he stressed the importance of personality integration (Perls, 1948), and this certainly would not be complete without the inclusion of cognitive abilities. This was also a stance to bring greater focus on emotional expression and body awareness than there had been in Freudian psychoanalysis. In the 1960s at Esalen his slogan was “I do my thing, and you do your thing,” emphasizing individualism and separateness. Yet earlier, Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman stressed the interdependence of the person and the environment, and near the end of Perls’ life, ironically, he founded a kibbutz-like therapeutic community at Lake Cowichan near Vancouver, Canada. This was the place where he finally felt at home and a part of a family and a community. He felt happier there than he had ever been in his whole life. (Clark & Mackewn, 1993, 27-8))

It is true that Perls often displayed the notorious style of behavior described by Dublin as “Perls-ism.” Yet, underlying that behavior, (minus the harmful elements), were many of the fundamental principles and values that make Gestalt therapy what it is today. As Clarkson and

Mackewn state, “Gestalt practice today embodies dialogue, presence and support as well as creative confrontation based on the Gestalt principles of phenomenological awareness and field theory. ... Modern Gestalt therapy has witnessed a return to a valuation of thinking, theory and intellectual creativity, as well as an emphasis on sensory awareness and emotional expressivity.” (1993, 141,145)

Illustrative Quotations:

- **Dublin:** “The therapist who is a ‘Perlsian’ ... is almost utterly and consistently non-supportive. ... Perls ... is a radical frustrator. He will not answer a question unless it is a how ... question. He calls questions ‘hooks’ ... on which the therapist should avoid being caught ‘helping’ or ‘being helpful.’” “... another implication ... is a willingness to ‘therapize’ a patient away from as well as toward social norms or societal adjustment.” ... “To the extent that a Gestalt therapist is a ‘Perlsian,’ his *only* function is to make the patient aware of how he is. Any change is strictly up to the patient.” “ ‘Perlsism’ has virtually no ‘shoulds’, it is almost totally nihilistic., It is certainly not altruistic.” The ‘Perlsian’ ... is virtually never protective of a patient, and may be extremely confrontive.”

“A true ‘Perlsian’ tells the person who calls him on the phone to threaten suicide, ‘I take no responsibility for you; if you do that, I will never see you alive again’ ... and hangs up the phone.” “Perls regards all feelings of helplessness, aloneness, and alienation as reducing essentially to an infantilism, the cure for which is further frustration to assist the organism to stand on its own two feet.” (1976, 143-145, 148-49)

- **Fritz Perls:** “Maturation is the development from environmental support to self-support. ... But in the neurotic this process does not adequately take place. ... the childish neurotic ... will use his potential not for self-support, but to act out phony roles ... meant to mobilize the environment for support instead of mobilizing one’s own potential. We manipulate the environment by being helpless, by playing stupid, asking questions, wheedling, flattering ... asking for environmental support keeps one in the infantile state.” (1970/71, 17-18, 26)

- **Resnick:** “To do for the other what he is capable of doing for himself insures his not becoming aware that he can stand on his own two feet. ... Perls, in a more poetic mood, states that the essence of Gestalt therapy is allowing (by frustrating) the patient to discover that he can ‘wipe his own ass.’ ” (1970/1992, 54)

- **Fritz Perls:** “... *science*, or as I call it ‘about-ism,’ ... lets us talk *about* things, ... *about* others, ... *about* what is going on in ourselves, *about* our cases. Talking about ... ourselves and others, as though we were things, keeps out any emotional responses or other genuine involvement. In therapy, aboutism is found in rationalization and intellectualization, and in the ‘interpretation game’ where the therapist says, ‘This is what your difficulties are about.’ This approach is based on non-involvement.” (1970/1971, 15)

- **Fritz Perls:** “The ‘should’ mentality is found overtly or covertly in every philosophy and definitely in every religion. ... Religions are full of taboos, of *shoulds* and *should nots*. ... You grow up completely surrounded by what you should and should not do, and ... you spend much of your time playing this game within yourself ... One part of you talks to the other part and says, ‘You should be better, you should not be this way, you should not do that, you shouldn’t be what you are, you should be what you are not.’ ” (1970/1971, 15)

- **Naranjo:** “I was very impressed with how much could be done without the conventional use of psychoanalytic interpretation. It seemed like Fritz had another kind of awareness, ... which seemed

to be almost psychic. ...I think it was...connected with seeing in gestalts rather than in terms of detail. To perceive configurations is a subtle form of computation, which constitutes much of what is called intuition. ...Fritz could see the total gestalt. He could see a certain rhythm in events and thus know what was coming and what was missing, and what a person was silent about.” (in Gaines, 1979, 297)

• **Shepherd**: “Because Gestalt techniques, in general, facilitate the discovering, facing, and resolution of the patient’s major conflicts in often dramatically short time, the inexperienced therapist-observer or patient may assume that gestalt offers “instant cure’. Even in experienced Gestalt therapists, the temptation to direct or push the patient to a stance of full support too fast, too soon, may result in pseudo-integration and subsequent disappointment. In many patients, the task of relinquishing their immaturities is a tedious and long-term process filled with tentative risking and retreating, requiring the steadfast presence and support of the therapist.” (Fagan and Shepherd, 1970/1971, 236)

Last Update: 12/16/12

Stephanie Sabar, MSW, LCSW
Website: stephaniesabar.com