

“Know there will be pleasure, there will be suffering and I am in the present, in the moment.”

An Oral History of Gestalt Therapy; published by the Gestalt Journal, 1989

Interviews with those involved in the original development of Gestalt:

- Laura Perls
- Isadore From
- Erving Polster
- Miriam Polster
- Elliott Shapiro

As I write I reflect on the impact of these wonderful Gestalt pioneers, who as explorers of the psychotherapeutic landscape not only created Gestalt psychotherapy but also the core concepts which form significant aspects of the known and unconscious foundations of my life's work as a Transactional Analyst psychotherapist, trainer and supervisor. I owe them a great debt as I reflect on their ideas; creations of original, evolutionary thinking and practice. In these conversations they show great honesty and enthusiasm in their willingness to engage with the endeavour and art of psychotherapy. I also want to acknowledge the privileged living experience I had as a client of Gestalt therapist and trainer Peter Philippson for 5 years in Manchester UK.

A conversation with Laura Perls (May 1977)

- a) Body work is an integral aspect of holistic gestalt psychotherapy – the origins of Laura Perls ideas about the role of the body come not from Reich / Alexander etc – but from her study and experience of contemporary dance.
- b) Laura who had a doctorate in psychology and had trained as a psychoanalyst when living in Berlin researched the methods of feeding and weaning babies. Based on her research Fritz Perls wrote his first paper for a psychoanalytic conference in Czechoslovakia in 1936 entitled “Oral resistances”. She describes how Fritz expected his ideas to be accepted as an advancement of psychoanalysis in the 1936 conference but he was in fact mostly rejected. Laura was in psychoanalysis every day for 2.5 years while also working with Gestalt psychologists – and she found it all too much “it didn't go together”.
- c) Laura says that “stuff is stuffed into little kids... leading to introjection. They are not allowed time to chew”. This ideas were central to her developing concentration on the detailed daily activities of eating, dressing, walking etc. In its essence, gestalt therapy was a revisionist Freudian psychoanalytic approach developed round the concept of what and how we eat.
- d) Married in 1930 they move from Germany to South Africa – “sent by Ernest Jones”- president of the international psychoanalytic association to form a psychoanalytic foundation. However due to decisions by the association in 1938 they had to give up their training institute in South Africa.
- e) By then she says “I paid a great deal of attention not only to what people said but also to their breathing, their co-ordination. I started to do body work and sit opposite my patients”.

- f) If I wanted someone to lie down I had them lie on the floor and do experiments with coordination and alignment. While: “At that time Fritz was still addicted to the couch and never quite got rid of it” She tells how Fritz smoked when the patient was on the couch – up to 4 packs a day – “he would have lived 10 years longer if he had not smoked”. However, she says “When sitting behind the patient on the couch I knitted otherwise I would have smoked”
- g) In 1946 Fritz moved to New York and Laura followed in 1947 – Fritz went on to work with Wilhelm Reich for a while, however they both still described themselves as psychoanalysts. This changed in 1950 with the publication of the book Gestalt Therapy”, followed by the development of the Gestalt Institute in 1952.
- h) As Laura became successful she and Fritz “drifted apart” he could not stand criticism from people such as Paul Weis and so he left New York. Afterwards Laura describes how Gestalt became identified with what Fritz did: “He was pre-occupied by his “hot seat method”. “That is fine for a demonstration but you cannot carry on a whole therapy that way. Yet people do. I think people are limiting themselves and doing a lot of harm.”
- i) She describes how Fritz said that individual therapy was obsolete because “he couldn’t be bothered anymore”. In the last 10 years he only worked with professional people who had already done their own therapies, however Laura describes working for 40 years with individuals and groups.
- j) Laura describes how therapy is the moment to moment, whatever comes up from the past as memories must have significance now. Gestalt is not an encounter approach which imposes itself on the patient. “Gestalt therapy is existential, experiential and experimental... The Gestalt therapist uses himself and herself ... whatever applies at the time, to the actual situation, a patient, a group, a trainee. Experience is on the boundary, go too quickly and there is a lack of support leading to anxiety. “I work with contact and support and experience”. Without a clear boundary experience the client is open to projection and introjection.
- k) She describes how Field theory originates from physics (Max Planck) and was brought into Gestalt - using the term I am aware, “like the space between breathing in and out. The awareness”. We make choices in terms of what is dominant, what is of interest – foreground is of greatest interest and “of course, how it relates to the background”
- l) Resistances (blocks) are fixed Gestalten which interrupt contact. Therapy is to “de-automatize” these blocks. First comes awareness, then exaggeration leads to experimentation and the possibility of different directions. Every patient brings what they have and finding what is possible – leading to development, not getting better or worse but change, things just are. “Life is change”.
- m) Laura describes how the leader can also become a block, people imitating their style. Fritz was in theatre, and he wanted to become a theatre director. His hot seat work was based on 50 years’ experience knowing who he could and could not work with in that way. At the same time he and Laura were both suspicious of the “joy boys, the miracle people”. All the instant things.

- n) Joy and happiness are by-products of good functioning. Suffering is also an aspect of creative living. “Know there will be pleasure, there will be suffering and I am in the present, in the moment.” She says that “Pursuit of happiness is very illegitimate – its incidental.”

A conversation with Isadore From June 1978

- a) This conversation starts with a lovely description of her search for a low-cost therapy – and how this led her to the shabby and worn-down office and person of Fritz Perls in New York shortly after he arrived there from South Africa. He informed her he would not work with her as he needed paying clients – she said with courage “I can’t wait” – and mentioned she was studying phenomenology. At which point he commanded her to lie down on the couch. He then told me to describe everything I experienced and to begin each sentence with “here and now”. He sat behind me and I remember no words that he said to me.
- b) She then recalls only two experiences with him: Fritz asking if she was having sexual fantasies about him. Followed by another episode in which she told him shocking details of her experiences to which he said nothing, leading to her becoming angry and throwing an ashtray at him. To which he replied “good – good – good”. She then wonders if he was saying good because she missed him!
- c) After a while Fritz referred her on to work with Laura Perls who she experienced as more supportive and more in direct contact, sitting in front of her, while she was still lying on the couch, rather than behind her like Fritz had done. When she went on to become a therapist herself she copied Laura rather than Fritz.
- d) Isadore describes at length how she became a therapist; at Fritz’s insistence and after two years she took over all his practice. She goes onto describe the writing of the book Gestalt Therapy. The theory was written by Paul Goodman, starting with a poor manuscript that Fritz had written. She describes the influences on the book particularly from Otto Rank, Wilhelm Reich and of others.
- e) There follows a long discussion of her commencing training others in Gestalt and the dangers of imitators who introjected the latter work by Fritz and were not sufficiently knowledgeable or self-critical.
- f) She describes how “the here and now” which is usually referenced to Fritz Perls was in fact taken by Fritz from the psychoanalyst Otto Rank who believed that focussing on the present was crucially important. Otto Rank also suggested analysis of each aspect of a dream as a projection. (Despite Fritz announcing this idea as his own discovery!) There follows an interesting discussion on dream work and how the client becomes each element / projection, the work is to assimilate them. Additionally, dreams can be thought of as retroflection, especially those prior to or following a therapy session which are reflections on the relationship between the client and therapist. An example is used of a client reporting a dream and describing an aspect of the dream as foolish – the therapist goes on to ask: In which way was I foolish in the last session?
- g) In the discussion Isadore says she rarely uses empty chair work as she prefers to keep in direct contact with the client who is invited to experience being the parts and to describe his feelings as he does so.

- h) She describes how understanding transference creates the ability to emphasise the here and now which makes psychotherapy possible. Making it possible to finish unfinished business from the past in the here and now. Everything the client experiences in the room, in the present with the therapist is significant and we also ask questions such as how am I like your mother / father.
- i) Fritz described maturity as transitioning from external / environmental support to self-support, however Isadore describes how difficult it is to understand health which is notoriously unpredictable as opposed to neurotic behaviour which is predictable.

Conversation with Erving and Miriam Polster: October 1978

- a) This conversation starts with stories of how they first became involved in the Gestalt training with Fritz, Laura, Isadora, Paul Goodman and Paul Weis... all interesting stuff, for example Erving describes his experience of Fritz as being both cutting and the most tender of all people, and how he loved this contrast and his vibrancy in life. Saying that “Fritz could assimilate the large story – making himself large and if the story were small he would stoop to hear it... he seemed a genius... a man who could cast spells”.
- b) Referring to Otto Rank’s concepts they describe the purpose of dream work: “To work with all the disowned parts of the self.”
- c) When asked what are the differences between the two of them Miriam describes how Erving is “crazier – when he is crazy someone has got to be not crazy”. She goes on to describe how he is very concrete – taking the simplicity of experience and making it obvious. He is a master at the free association leap to make connections with consistency. There is a kind of contagious excitement.
- d) Erving describes how Miriam stays with the client wherever they are going until there is that special moment of a beautiful experience. A person is less likely to be afraid with her than with me, a warmth, supportive and respect.
- e) There follows a discussion about the risk / danger of respectability for gestalt psychotherapy.

A conversation with Elliott Shapiro: June 1985

- a) There is an interesting discussion on his life, relationships and experiences in the gestalt community, including describing the originators of Gestalt therapy as anarchists. He also discusses the significance of Laura Perls not taking charge of the Gestalt institute, while also criticizing Fritz for creating a travelling act and short films. He quotes Paul Goodman who said at a memorial service for Fritz that he had taken Gestalt down the wrong road, and therefore it was becoming anti-intellectual. Goodman also gave credit to Laura for developing Gestalt concepts. The credit which had for a long time been denied her.