



Gestalt Therapy: Student Perceptions of Fritz Perls in *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*

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The *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy (TAP)* videotape series introduces students to three major schools of psychotherapy: client-centered therapy, Gestalt therapy, and rational-emotive therapy. A sample of undergraduate students viewed the *TAP* series. The students were surveyed about their observations of Gestalt therapy and Fritz Perls' interactions with and treatment of Gloria, the client. This importance of the film series is its presentation of psychotherapy as done in that time by the founders of these schools. Videotapes are routinely employed educationally to show therapy techniques and illuminate theory. This paper examines the usefulness of this video to teach gestalt therapy to psychology students in four sections — two underclass and two upper class sections — in the same term. Student perceptions of this 40-year-old film series are explored. The gender relationship of therapist and client is shown as an example of the apparent sexism of the culture and cognitive processes of the time and its participants. Results found to today's instructionally sophisticated students agreed with Perls' explanation and portrayal of gestalt therapy and interactions with Gloria, his adult client.

KEYWORDS: Perls, gestalt, Gloria, TAP, gestalt therapy

- 14 The videotape series *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy (TAP)* was recorded in 1964 and released in 1965. This collection presents three notable therapists as each practices his school of therapy to counsel a client identified only as 'Gloria'. *TAP* features Carl Rogers' illustration of client-centered therapy, Fritz Perls' demonstration of Gestalt therapy, and Albert Ellis' presentation of rational-emotive therapy (Essig & Russell, 1990; Kiesler & Goldston, 1988; Konrad & Yoder, 2000; Shostrom & Riley, 1968). This article focuses on the *TAP* session between Dr Fritz Perls and Gloria.

Gestalt therapy was originally a radical approach to psychotherapy. Gestalt has been recognised as a 'dialectic' method due to its various concepts drawn from

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pre-existing schools of thought in psychotherapy, philosophy, and religion. Gestalt includes conceptions of phenomenology, pragmatism, humanistic field theory, and existentialist views from Taoism and Zen Buddhism (Bastas, 2004; Bowman & Brownell, 2000; Crocker & Philippson, 2005; Ginger 2004; Latner, 2005; Ullman, 2006; Van de Riet, 2001; Wagner-Moore, 2004; Wolfert, 2000). Phenomenology is a core concept for Gestalt. There is also a holistic emphasis drawn from Buddhism and Taoism to understand human processes (Becker, 1993; Crocker & Philippson, 2005; Ullman, 2006; Van de Riet, 2001; Wagner-Moore, 2004; Wolfert, 2000).

Gestalt therapy focuses on the client's present and current interaction between therapist and client (Konrad & Yoder, 2000). The goal in this therapeutic framework is enacting rather than narrating. This theoretical directive forgoes recurrent use of predications and specifications (Essig & Russell, 1990). Gestalt technique focuses on current experiencing so awareness is of the present moment (Hill, Thames & Rardin, 1979). Gestalt theory holds that the client's perception is blocked. Gestalt therapy aims to free the client by assisting the client to find his or her own motives, activities, and unconscious to achieve self-control (Becker, 1993).

To accomplish this goal the client must frankly process their relationships and their world, see situations from a new perspective, and realise how the present condition and its preferred substitute may be connected (Hinksman, 2001). A Gestalt therapist attempts to have the client comprehend his or her situation in a safe environment. The therapist provides no analysis of the problems at hand (Konrad & Yoder, 2000). The practitioner encourages client responsibility (Meara, Shannon & Pepinsky, 1979). Responsibility focuses on one's 'self-as-source' (Binderman, 1974).

During his session with Gloria, Perls used Gestalt principles of confrontation and awareness of current experience (Gustavson, Cundick, & Lambert, 1981). Perls also addressed inconsistencies he saw in Gloria's behaviors (Hill, Thames, & Rardin, 1979). Researchers found Perls used direct guidance followed by interpretation, information, and open questioning when based on the Hill Counselor Verbal Response Category System (Hill, Thames & Rardin, 1979). Response categories of Nonverbal Referent, Approval-Reassurance, Confrontation, Closed Question, and Minimal Encourager were found throughout the session, as Perls did not rely on any single communication type (Hill, Thames & Rardin, 1979).

Gestalt has been noted as being essentially the product of Perls' personality (Dolliver, 1981; Wagner-Moore, 2004). His apparent disinterest in Gloria seems to puzzle her, yet his behavior had a therapeutic motivation (Dolliver, Williams & Gold, 1980). Through his casual manner and habit of changing the topic or even annoying her fits, it is observed that he often was developing theory and techniques as he was doing them (Melnick, 2006). Given that Gloria had been in therapy for several months before this session, she had some expectations and was somewhat therapy-wise (Dolliver, Williams & Gold 1980).

Perls clearly was exploring her view of the world by his behaviours. Gestalt and Perls held emotional and humanistic tenets in contrast to Freud's rationalist determinism (Ginger, 2004). Freud described countertransference as the 'emotional reaction of the analyst to a patient's transference', which he believed to be a detrimental part of the psychoanalytic process (Singer, Sincoff & Kolligian, 1989). In contrast, Perls and his conceptualisation of therapy expected countertransference. Perls expected the therapist to react to a client's looks or behaviors as part of the

therapeutic process (Thomas, 2007). He irritated Gloria to learn about her personality (Ullman, 2006). We may be viewing calculated countertransference in his treatment of Gloria. Possibly she reminds him of someone in his past, although he does not explain this point. While Freud regarded countertransference as a hindrance in psychotherapy, Perls and Gestalt theory welcome this occurrence as a means to promote the process of Gestalt therapy (Thomas, 2007). It is valued as a typical consequence to the way that individuals process information (Singer, Sincoff & Kolligian, 1989).

Gestalt is a synthesis of preexisting secular concepts and even religious articles of faith (Bastas, 2004; Bowman & Brownell, 2000; Crocker & Philippon, 2005; Wagner-Moore, 2004; Wolfert, 2000). Therefore, Gestalt as a therapy and Perls as a therapist could employ a number of techniques and be motivated by various assumptions. Perls apparently felt no obligation to anyone, including his client; only to the process of psychotherapy (Binderman, 1974). He held an ideal that people will always be processing their situation and making sense of the figure and ground (Jacobs, 2005). This conceptualisation is the essential psychotherapeutic view in Gestalt: each individual is his or her own figure and their world is their background. There is at least one other film recording of Perls conducting therapy. It was made the year before his death in 1970. His agreement to be recorded shows his ease at being observed in practice and concern for leaving a record as a therapist (Rosenberg, 2002).

Shostrom & Riley (1968) found Perls to be the highest rated therapist in *TAP* for Interpersonal Analysing, Encountering, and Feeling. While Gloria struggled with assertiveness and self-disclosure during their session Perls labeled her as 'a phony' (Essig & Russell, 1990; Konrad & Yoder, 2000). Kiesler & Goldston (1988) quote an unpublished honors thesis by Zians (1981) on therapist behavior in *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*. Zians reported that raters found Perls to be the most dominant therapist. Raters linked him with aspects of hostility, mistrust and competitiveness. During his segment both participants were judged to be hostile-dominant. Gloria responded to his hostility and cold nature with her own hostility (Kiesler & Goldston, 1988).

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Our aim is to learn the views of today's students about gender relationships portrayed in the videotape. Today's student audience is likely to approve of nonsexist language and behaviors. The culture of 1964 could be considered sexist in the view of the culture of the 21st century. It is important to question whether *TAP* portrays sexist cultural prejudices. Sexist conditioning may well be rooted in unconscious thought. There is a general acceptance in the helping professions now that nonsexist counselling is fundamental to self-realisation of clients and the development of helpful counsellors (Moore & Strickler, 1980). It is possible Gloria was frustrated and uncomfortable with Perls (Kiesler & Goldston, 1988). However, it is interesting that she stated in the end-of-day review in the third videotape that her interaction with Perls was the most valuable to her and she wished she had more time with him (Meara, Shannon & Pepinsky, 1979). It was during this session she found her 'fighting-self' (Meara, Shannon & Pepinsky, 1979).

Students who enter the helping professions, or whose interests lie in psychology, will be informed by this videotape. It is useful to learn the impact of widely used media and teaching techniques upon today's student. Shostrom's *Three Approaches*

to *Psychotherapy (TAP)* is used to educate today's student at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Glauser & Bozarth, 2001; Gustavson, Cundick & Lambert, 1981; Kiesler & Goldston, 1988; Konrad & Yoder, 2000). Can today's student gain a useful understanding of these important therapeutic techniques from viewing *TAP*? This film series is central to psychology, psychotherapy, and counseling. It will be helpful for researchers and academics to know how today's student can relate to these films, these therapists, and their therapies.

■ Participants

A questionnaire was administered to four undergraduate psychology classes at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The samples consisted of two General Psychology sections, one section of Cognitive Psychology and one section of Abnormal Psychology. Students in Introductory sections may have been unaware of specific theories and practices in the field. We aimed to learn if students of different class levels have different impressions of this film. Such data can help instructors in their instruction.

Thirty students in the upper level classes acknowledged taking previous courses in psychology. A majority had taken an introductory class in the field. Students were aware the researchers were interested in perceptions of each therapist, the techniques demonstrated by each therapist, and the interactions of each therapist with Gloria. A sample of 97 students was taken from the four sections. Students viewed all segments of the video series and voluntarily completed the questionnaire.

The respondents' ages ranged from 18 through 22 in all but two cases. The average age of the students was 19. These two students were over the age of 30. Only 5 students were self-identified as married.

■ Measure

The self-devised questionnaire consisted of 22 questions. It was peer-reviewed before being used. The instrument contained five questions about each therapist and five questions about Gloria. Two questions measured technical features of sound and visual aspects of the film series. Students rated answers using a five-point scale (1 for *Strongly Disagree*, 2 for *Disagree*, 3 for *Neutral/Not Applicable*, 4 for *Agree* and 5 for *Strongly Agree*.)

Students were asked to indicate class standing. Student responses compared differences found in introductory sections to upper level sections. Underclassmen were compared to upperclassmen. Students were divided into units of Freshman, Sophomore and Pre-Junior (underclassmen) versus Junior and Senior (upperclassmen). The category of Other was established for students who did not specify their class standing. Data was collected on how well the student believed each therapist explained and enacted his psychotherapeutic approach, if the therapist treated Gloria with respect and seemed genuinely interested in her, and if the student would recommend the therapist.

Results

Ninety-seven undergraduate students participated in this survey. Thirty-six respondents reported underclass status of Freshman, Sophomore or Pre-Junior. Forty-six students listed upper class status of Junior or Senior. Fifteen respondents did not indicate standing. Forty-two students completed the survey in General Psychology sections while 55 students were enrolled in a Cognitive Psychology or Abnormal Psychology section.

Students were pleased in overall terms with Perls' explanation and presentation of Gestalt therapy. Respondents did not feel Perls treated Gloria respectfully although many students believed that Perls was genuinely interested in her. Students were divided on whether or not to recommend him as a therapist, although a larger percentage disagreed on this point. Results were consistent whether students were defined by section level or class status. This information is summarised in Table 1.1 through Table 5.2.

In response to Question #1, 'Fritz Perls explained this theory well'. 75% of Psychology 101 students answered *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* and 25% disagreed. Students in Abnormal and Cognitive Psychology sections indicated *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* at 67.3% while 9.1% of the group disagreed. Seventy-five per cent of underclassmen indicated *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* that Perls explained Gestalt theory well while 66.7% of upper class respondents and 71.4% of the Other students gave the same response. Consequently, 5.6% of underclassmen, 2.2% of upperclassmen and 21.4% of Other students disagreed. Of the students in the sample, 70.5% were pleased with Perls' explanation, while 6.3% disagreed.

In answering Question #2, 21.5% of General Psychology students and 32.7% of advanced Psychology students indicated *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* to 'Fritz Perls treated Gloria respectfully'. General Psychology students marked *Disagree* in 38.1% of this sample while 9.5% of introductory section students and 3.6% of advanced section students indicated *Strongly Disagree* with this statement. Of the underclassmen, 30.5% indicated *Agree*, 27.8% stated *Disagree* and 13.9% marked *Strongly Disagree*. In the upper class group 28.2% marked *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* while 43.5% had the opinion of *Disagree* and 2.2% opted for *Strongly Disagree*. Students with the status of Other registered *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* at 20% while 33.3% indicated *Disagree*. In overall terms 27.8% of students believed Perls treated Gloria respectfully while 42.3% responded with *Disagree* or *Strongly Disagree*.

Question #3 found that 51.2% of introductory students and 63.6% of advanced section students answered *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* that 'Fritz Perls enacted his theory well' while 4.9% of General Psychology students and 7.3% of Abnormal and Cognitive Psychology students held the opinion of *Disagree*. *Strongly Disagree* was the view of 2.4% of introductory Psychology students. The majority of upperclassmen respondents, 69.5%, indicated *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*. Underclassmen responses included 48.6% who answered both *Agree* items while 11.4% stated *Disagree* and 2.9% listed *Strongly Disagree*. Of students in the Other category, 46.6% answered *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* with the above statement while 13.3% stated that Perls did not present his theory well. The majority of students, 58.3%, felt Perls enacted his theory well while 7.3% felt otherwise.

For Question #4, 35.7% of Psychology 101 students and 52.8% of advanced section students answered *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* to the question 'Fritz Perls seemed genuinely interested in Gloria'. On the other hand 28.6% of General Psychology students and 21.8% of advanced section students disagreed with this statement.

Strongly Disagree was indicated by 3.6% of the Abnormal and Cognitive students which was 4.3% of the upperclassmen. *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* were the opinions of 38.9% of underclassmen, 54.3% of upperclassmen, and 33.3% of Other students. In contrast 25% of underclassmen, 24% of upperclassmen, and 26.7% of Other students disagreed with this statement. Of the 97 students in the sample, 45.4% found Perls to be genuinely interested in his client compared to the 26.8% who disagreed at one level or the other.

Question #5 stated 'I would recommend Fritz Perls as a therapist'. The answers of *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* were given by 26.2% of General Psychology students and 43.6% of Abnormal or Cognitive Psychology students. *Disagree* was indicated by 28.6% of introductory section students while 11.9% disagreed strongly. Similar results were found among advanced section students where 25.5% disagreed and 10.9% strongly disagreed. *Strongly Disagree* was indicated by 13.9% of underclassmen, 10.9% of upperclassmen, and 6.7% of Other students. *Disagree* was answered by 19.4% of underclassmen, 30.4% of upperclassmen, and 33.3% of Other students. The recommendation of Fritz Perls as a therapist garnered an agreement of 40% of Other students, 34.8% of upperclassmen and 36.1% of underclassmen. Overall, 36.1% of these students would recommend Perls as a therapist while 38.1% would not.

Discussion

Overall the students in our sample were satisfied with Perls' presentation in *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*. Respondents registered a 75% rate of agreement with his explanation of Gestalt theory and 58.3% were satisfied with Perls' demonstration of the theory. The largest portion of respondents was displeased with his treatment of Gloria. A large number of students felt, at the level of 42.3%, that he did not treat her respectfully while 45.4% found he was sincerely interested in Gloria. In general, respondents indicated they would not recommend him as a therapist, although the issue was closely divided with 38.1% compared to 36.1%. Responses concerning Perls were predominantly positive when compared to previous research. Students were least pleased with Perls when he was compared to the TAP segments of Carl Rogers and Albert Ellis and issues of interest in this research.

As with all research it would be beneficial to take the issue further and survey a larger sample of students. It might be useful to question students from different universities or to compare students on female versus male perspectives. As always, it will be of interest for researchers to compare Psychology majors with non-Psychology majors and graduate students with undergraduate students. With such information researchers might gain a better understanding of whether the *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy* series is educational for students or whether prior knowledge in the field plays a larger role in student perceptions of these three fundamental schools of psychotherapy.

QUESTION #1: FRITZ PERLS EXPLAINED HIS THEORY WELL.

TABLE 1.1

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral/Not applicable	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	Totals
General psychology students*	0	1	9	21	9	40
Percentage (rounded)	0%	2.50%	22.50%	52.50%	22.50%	100%
Advanced psychology students	0	5	13	25	12	55
Percentage (rounded)	0%	9.10%	23.60%	45.50%	21.80%	100%

Note: *2 students did not answer Question 1.

TABLE 1.2

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral/Not applicable	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	Totals
Underclassmen	0	2	7	18	9	36
Percentage (rounded)	0%	5.60%	19.40%	50.00%	25.00%	100%
Upperclassmen*	0	1	14	21	9	45
Percentage (Rounded)	0%	2.20%	31.10%	46.70%	20.00%	100%
Other*	0	3	1	7	3	14
Percentage (rounded)	0%	21.40%	7.20%	50.00%	21.40%	100%

Note: *2 students did not answer Question 1.

QUESTION #2: FRITZ PERLS TREATED GLORIA RESPECTFULLY.

TABLE 2.1

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral/Not applicable	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	Totals
General psychology students	4	16	13	7	2	42
Percentage (rounded)	9.50%	38.10%	30.90%	16.70%	4.80%	100%
Advanced psychology students	2	19	16	16	2	55
Percentage (rounded)	3.60%	34.60%	29.10%	29.10%	3.60%	100%

TABLE 2.2

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral/Not applicable	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	Totals
Underclassmen	5	10	10	11	0	36
Percentage (rounded)	13.90%	27.80%	27.80%	30.50%	0%	100%
Upperclassmen	1	20	12	10	3	46
Percentage (rounded)	2.20%	43.50%	26.10%	21.70%	6.50%	100%
Other	0	5	7	2	1	15
Percentage (rounded)	0%	33.30%	46.70%	13.30%	6.70%	100%

QUESTION 3: FRITZ PERLS ENACTED HIS THEORY WELL.

TABLE 3.1

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral/Not applicable	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	Totals
General psychology students*	1	2	17	16	5	41
Percentage (rounded)	2.40%	4.90%	41.50%	39.00%	12.20%	100%
Advanced psychology students	0	4	16	23	12	55
Percentage (rounded)	0%	7.30%	29.10%	41.80%	21.80%	100%

Note: *1 student did not answer Question 3.

TABLE 3.2

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral/Not applicable	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	Totals
Underclassmen*	1	4	13	12	5	35
Percentage (rounded)	2.90%	11.40%	37.10%	34.30%	14.30%	100%
Upperclassmen	0	0	14	22	10	46
Percentage (rounded)	0%	0%	30.40%	47.80%	21.70%	100%
Other	0	2	6	5	2	15
Percentage (rounded)	0%	13.30%	40.00%	33.30%	13.30%	100%

Note: *1 student did not answer Question 3.

QUESTION 4: FRITZ PERLS SEEMED GENUINELY INTERESTED IN GLORIA.

TABLE 4.1

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral/Not applicable	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	Totals
General psychology Students	0	12	15	12	3	42
Percentage (rounded)	0%	28.60%	35.70%	28.60%	7.10%	100%
Advanced psychology students	2	12	12	20	9	55
Percentage (rounded)	3.60%	21.80%	21.80%	36.40%	16.40%	100%

TABLE 4.2

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral/Not applicable	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	Totals
Underclassmen	0	9	13	10	4	36
Percentage (rounded)	0%	25.00%	36.10%	27.80%	11.10%	100%
Upperclassmen	2	11	8	19	6	46
Percentage (rounded)	4.30%	24.00%	17.40%	41.30%	13.00%	100%
Other	0	4	6	3	2	15
Percentage (rounded)	0%	26.70%	40.00%	20.00%	13.30%	100%

QUESTION 5: I WOULD RECOMMEND FRITZ PERLS AS A THERAPIST.

TABLE 5.1

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral/Not applicable	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	Totals
General psychology students	5	12	14	6	5	42
Percentage (rounded)	11.90%	28.60%	33.30%	14.30%	11.90%	100%
Advanced psychology students	6	14	11	17	7	55
Percentage (rounded)	10.90%	25.50%	20.00%	30.90%	12.70%	100%

TABLE 5.2

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral/Not applicable	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree	Totals
Underclassmen	5	7	11	10	3	36
Percentage (rounded)	13.90%	19.40%	30.50%	27.80%	8.30%	100%
Upperclassmen	5	14	11	9	7	46
Percentage (rounded)	10.90%	30.40%	23.90%	19.60%	15.20%	100%
Other	1	5	3	4	2	15
Percentage (rounded)	6.70%	33.30%	20.00%	26.70%	13.30%	100%

While contemporary students may be concerned by Perls' treatment of Gloria and be less likely to recommend him as a therapist, these undergraduates believe he explained and enacted his theory well. Our findings validate the use of the *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy* series in higher education Psychology courses since students were learning and understanding the theoretical constructs presented in this session. Although TAP has been used for four decades, it can be considered a useful instructional tool for today's students.

Cultural developments since 1964 have championed ideals of gender equality and motivated attempts to establish gender equality. Education, employment and political institutions have opened and attempted to redress historical gender inequalities since the 1960s. Using the videotapes of *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy* can be more effective for today's students when instructors brief students on cultural commonalities present in 1964 which are not cultural commonalities in the 21st century. Employing such an instructional caveat should continue the instructional utility of this important document far into the future.

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