

Module 11

Therapeutic Approaches in Social Work Interventions - Gestalt Therapy

Component 1A

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Component 1B

	Description of Module
Subject Name	Social Work Education
Paper Name	Working with Individuals and Families
Module Name	Therapeutic Approaches in Social Case Work Interventions: Gestalt Therapy
Module ID	SW/SCW/11
Pre Requisites	An understanding of the principles and methods of working with individuals and families
Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Learn about the life history of the founder – Frederick Fritz Perls.2. Understand the key concepts in Gestalt Therapy including Functions and Roles of the Gestalt Therapist.3. Learn the processes of Gestalt Therapy.4. Apply the techniques of Gestalt therapy.
Key words	Unfinished Business, Avoidance, Layers of Neurosis, Contact, Resistances to Contact, Integration

Quadrant 1

1. Introduction

Frederick Perls and his wife Laura Perls founded Gestalt therapy in the year 1940. It is a humanistic–existential counselling and psychotherapy and as humanism it stresses the importance of one’s own inborn capacity for growth and change and as existentialism it focuses on the responsibility people have for their own lives and their choices. Primarily existentialism is concerned with awareness of our being in the world. As an existential approach it is grounded on the here and now and emphasizes that each individual is responsible for his or her own destiny. The clients are asked to bring any concern of the past or of the future to the present and experience it directly. The classical Gestalt developed by Perls concentrates on self-awareness, whereas the contemporary Gestalt developed by the followers of Perls concentrates more on relationship – one’s relationship to self, to others and to the world. Because of its phenomenological basis, Gestalt therapy emphasizes the subjective human experience, which is more reliable than explanations and interpretations. In phenomenology importance is given to the perception of the reality by the client. Because of its experiential approach it teaches the clients to come to grips with what and how they are thinking, feeling and doing.

The word ‘gestalt’ cannot be directly translated into English language. It includes pattern, configuration, form and whole. We tend to perceive our environment in terms of ‘whole’ and we make meaning or create a form or gestalt from what we experience. Simply gestalt is a figure in relation to what is in the background.

2. Objectives

This module aims to enable the students to learn and understand:

- Life history of the founder – Frederick Fritz Perls.
- Key Concepts in Gestalt therapy including Unfinished Business, Avoidance, Layers of Neurosis, Contact and Resistances to Contact.
- Functions and Roles of the Gestalt Therapist.
- Process of Gestalt therapy.
- Techniques of Gestalt therapy.

3. Life History Of Frederick (Fritz) Perls (1893-1970)

Fritz Perls was born in 1893 in Germany. He earned his M.D. degree in 1926, and then worked at the Institute for Brain Damaged Soldiers in Frankfurt. Here Gestalt psychologists and existential philosophers influenced him. He was also influenced by Karen Horney, and eventually became a psychoanalyst. He worked with Paul Tillich and was influenced by Martin Buber. Perls and his wife, Laura Posner Perls, founded Gestalt therapy. They were not satisfied with psychoanalysis and wanted something different to

help patients. Gestalt psychology, with its emphasis on the whole person, was a useful principle for the development of this new type of therapy. Perls moved to South Africa in the early 1940s, where he wrote *Ego, Hunger, and Aggression: A Revision of Freud's Theory and Method* (1946). In the early 1950s, he moved to New York City, where he wrote *The Beginning of Gestalt Therapy* (with Ralph Hefferline and Paul Goodman) in 1951. Perls and his wife organized the New York Institute of Gestalt therapy in New York. He moved to California in 1960, where he continued to offer Gestalt therapy workshops until his death in 1970. Among Perls' important publications were his autobiography *In and Out of the Garbage Pail* (1969) and *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (1969), which is a description of his therapy.

4. Key Concepts

Gestalt therapy aims at integration of sometimes-conflicting dimensions within personality. The client is assisted to reown parts of himself/ herself that have been disowned and integrate them. The 'now' in Gestalt therapy is of great importance. If the past seems to have a significant influence on the present attitudes or behaviour, it is brought to the present and lived as much as possible. In a way the client enacts the past event as though he is living it now. If, for example; one had a traumatic experience with a significant person in the past, the client is asked to become the hurt child and dialogue directly with the significant person in fantasy and thus there is a reliving of the hurt and a potential to change it to understanding and resolution.

4.1 *Unfinished Business*

Unfinished business is the same as unexpressed feeling like resentment, rage, hatred, pain, anxiety, grief, guilt and abandonment. When feelings are not fully experienced in awareness, they usually linger in the background and enter into the present and interfere with effective contact with oneself and others. The unfinished business will hang on until it is faced and dealt with by the client. The unexpressed feelings seek completion and when they become powerful enough, they make the individual preoccupied and weary and engage in compulsive behaviour and self-defeating behaviour and experience oppressive energy. The unfinished business can also manifest itself in bodily blockage thus having a physical symptom. Resentment seems to be the worst kind of unfinished business. When people have resentment they are stuck and so they need to express their resentment fully. The impasse or stuck point is a situation of believing that one is unable to support oneself and thus seek external support. One copes with this situation by manipulating others especially by playing roles of weakness, helplessness, stupidity and foolishness. In therapy the client is encouraged to fully experience his condition of being stuck.

4.2 *Avoidance*

Avoidance is a means used by clients to evade facing unfinished business and experiencing the uncomfortable emotions associated with the unfinished business. In therapy the client is encouraged to experience unexpressed feeling and express whatever feeling one is afraid of facing.

4.3 *Layers of Neurosis*

In order to achieve psychological maturity one must strip off five layers of neurosis.

- 1) The Phony: The phony layer is the way we react to others in stereotypical and inauthentic ways playing games and getting lost in our roles.
- 2) The Phobic: In this, one attempts to avoid emotional pains associated with seeing aspects of oneself that one prefers to deny.
- 3) The Impasse: It is the point where we are stuck and we feel a sense of deadness and nothingness.

4) The Implosive: At this level we expose our defences and begin to make contact with our genuine self.

5) The explosive: In this final stage we let go of phony roles and pretences by releasing a tremendous amount of energy that we have been holding in by pretending to be what we are not.

4.4 Contact and Resistances to Contact

An effective contact will mean interacting with nature and with others without losing one's sense of individuality. Indeed contact is the lifeblood of growth. We all develop resistance to contact first of all by the five layers of neurosis and also by the five ego-defence mechanisms. They are introjection, projection, retroflection, deflection, and confluence.

4.4.1 Introjection: Introjection means taking in and accepting others' beliefs and standards uncritically and they always remain alien to us since they are not assimilated.

4.4.2 Projection: In projection we disown certain aspects of ourselves and assign them to others or environment just because those aspects do not coincide with our self-image. What we disown is put onto other people and we avoid taking responsibility for what we actually are.

4.4.3 Retroflection: It is doing to oneself what we would like to do to others or what we would like others do to us. We may be afraid of directing an aggression towards someone else and so we would direct that aggression to us and injure ourselves.

4.4.4 Deflection: *It is a way of distracting oneself by employing overuse of humour, abstract generalizations and questions and as a result it is difficult to maintain a sustained sense of contact.*

4.4.5 Confluence: *It is the blurring of the differentiation between the self and the environment and people suffer from lack of demarcation between internal experience and outer reality. This arises out of the need to be accepted and liked by others and so one does not express one's true feelings and opinions. In therapy one looks for where the energy is located, how it is used, and how it can be blocked. The blocked energy can act as resistance and it can be manifested by tension in some parts of the body, by posture, by keeping one's body tight and closed, and by speaking with a restricted voice. In therapy once the clients become aware of the resistance being expressed in their body by certain symptoms, they can be encouraged to delve deep into those physical symptoms; for example, by exaggerating their tight mouth and shaking legs they can realize how they had been blocking energy from free expression.*

5. Functions and Roles of Gestalt Therapist

The therapist needs to pay attention to the client's body language. Verbal communication may be a lie and non-verbal or body language tells the true story. Therefore the therapist concentrates his attention on the client's posture, movements, gestures, voice and hesitations. Thus the client may be asked to speak for and become his or her gestures or body parts. For example 'what do your legs speak?' 'Can you carry on a conversation between your right leg and the left leg?' 'If your body were to speak now, what would it say?' are some of the questions asked. Besides attending to the body language, the therapist needs to focus on the relationship between language patterns and personality, since speech patterns often reveal the feelings, thoughts and attitudes. By focusing on the overt speaking habits, the client is made aware of himself or herself to see if the words match what he or she is feeling within.

Some of the expressions that keep a distance between the client and the inner world of the client can be

challenged. For example, a client may use the word 'it' instead of 'I'. The sentence 'It is always miserable to be left alone' can be changed into 'I always feel miserable to be left alone.' The sentence 'You feel furious when people criticize you in public' can be changed into 'I feel furious when people criticize me in public.' Sometimes a person may ask a question to hide behind instead of making a statement. The counsellor could ask the clients to make personal statements and thereby assume responsibility for what they say instead of keeping themselves hidden behind a question. There are also language expressions that deny power. For example, instead of telling 'I can't' one can say 'I won't' and instead of 'should' 'ought to' one can say 'I choose' or 'I want to.' Sometimes clients use metaphors behind which one can detect a suppressed internal dialogue that represents critical unfinished business or reactions to a present interaction. For example, one says 'I am out of gear' and the therapist can ask the client to give the manifest content of the metaphor to encourage him/her to say more about the experience. The question could be 'What is the feeling like being out of gear?' Sometimes clients speak in elusive language and very significant clues can be got from the language. It is called 'fleshing out a flash.' The client can be asked to pick out a small part of what he/she has said and asked to elaborate it.

6. The Therapeutic Process

In Gestalt therapy the relationship between awareness and energy plays a vital role. When awareness is scattered, energy flow diminishes. The therapist usually suggests experiments in awareness focusing. In fact every psychological problem can be dealt with and resolved as a polarized conflict between two aspects of one's personality. In this the Gestalt therapists identify four stages.

6.1 Emergence of the problem: The client brings into awareness with increasing intensity a major conflict in the 'here and now' of the therapy session. While taking increased responsibility for one's thoughts, feelings, and sensations, the client becomes aware of the connection between verbal and non-verbal behaviours. The client experiences feelings and sensations and can also discover their links to body awareness and later give voice to those selected physical areas. Here what will be useful are the body correlates of verbal expression, like breathing pattern, hand gestures, voice tone, and posture. To facilitate greater clarity of experience of a particular body area, the therapist can suggest that a client repeat, exaggerate, or spontaneously develop a particular physical action in nonverbal form or express with increasing loudness and meaning key words and sentences. Now a specific emotional problem is likely to be present in awareness along with a corresponding physical area of tension.

6.2 Working with external polarities: At this level the growing tension is taken seriously to be explored with an external dialogue. Whether the problem is an intra or interpersonal one, it is good to initiate a conversation between the client and the significant other. Literally two chairs can be arranged to represent the two persons, the self and the significant other between whom is the tension or conflict. The significant other could be the person with whom feelings are currently experienced or historically have been experienced or even hypothetically can be experienced. The main objective of this stage is to dramatize the outer manifestation of an inner conflict of the hidden feelings brought to awareness.

6.3 Working with internal polarities: It is something similar to the working with external polarities but happens to be internal polarities of two significant and opposing aspects within the individual's personality.

It is assumed that the more fully each pole of tension is dramatized and experienced, the more likely it can be easily resolved. While each pole expands its territory in awareness, the tension may be painful to the point of the client feeling the tension as irresolvable and unbearable. This is the implosive layer of personality and a necessary precondition for the formation of a new Gestalt.

6.4 Integration: Now in the final stage what takes place is the resolution of the internal conflict resulting

from a major reorganization and re-perception of the problem. The conflict rises more powerfully into awareness; the more powerful the conflict the more intense is the awareness; the more intense the awareness, the more powerful will be the potential for release. Dramatically the release results in a spontaneous, uncontrolled physiological outpouring like tears, laughter and rage – the expression of the explosive layer of personality. At this level one observes that the aspects that were opposing each other in consciousness move to accept each other's actual identity with the result that the client experiences a fresh flow of life energy, an increased capacity for enjoyment, and a more expanded awareness into areas of existing and still unresolved tensions. When the integration takes place, one can also notice sympathetic responses in client's own body corresponding to his/her integration by means of relaxed muscles, smiles, laughter, quiet sighs and sobs.

7. Techniques of Gestalt Therapy

Through the techniques employed in this therapy the clients experience internal conflicts, resolve inconsistencies and dichotomies, and work through an impasse that prevents completing of unfinished business and thus gain full awareness. Keeping in mind the thrust of the Gestalt therapy, one could invent many techniques. Some of the techniques frequently used in Gestalt therapies are:

7.1 Dialogue exercise: This is the one most commonly used and people understand this as the main therapy. Usually different aspects of our personalities are in conflict with one another. Normally polarization takes place in a conflict situation. We can imagine a 'top dog' and an 'under dog.' Both dogs fight for their existence and one tries to control the other. This conflict is rooted in the mechanism of introjection by which aspects of others are incorporated into one's ego system. The empty-chair technique is one way of getting the client to externalize the introject. The client is asked to sit on one chair and be the top dog and act out its role and later he/she is asked to sit on the other chair and act out the role of the underdog. Now the conflict becomes too obvious and powerful. Subsequently the conflict is resolved by the acceptance and integration of both sides. Some of the polarities commonly found in clients are: the parent inside versus the child inside, the responsible one versus the impulsive one, the puritanical side versus the sexual side, the good boy versus the bad boy, the aggressive self versus the passive self, the autonomous side versus the resentful side and the hard worker versus the goof-off. In this exercise we can put any two aspects of an individual or the individual and somebody else.

7.2 Making the round: The individual in a group setting, is asked to go round and speak to or do something with each member of the group thus confronting, risking, disclosing the self, experimenting with new behaviour and growing and changing. For example, the person who has the 'please me' driver and has no guts to say 'no' to others can be asked to go to each member of the group and say 'no' emphatically. The other members of the group might overpower the person with a 'no' much louder and the individual shouts aloud and affirms his or her 'no' thus gaining confidence in saying 'no' to people.

7.3 I take responsibility for: When a person feels rejected he or she is asked to say 'I take responsibility for my being rejected.' This saying facilitates the individual to realize he or she needs to accept his or her feelings instead of projecting them onto others.

7.4 Playing the projection: The kernel of projection is seeing clearly in another the very things one does not want to see in oneself and accept them as one's own. In fact so much of energy is spent in denying one's feelings and attributing them to others. For example, one has problem in accepting the moral weakness of others. This may be the projection in the sense that the person is not willing to accept his or her own moral weakness and that is projected onto others.

7.5 Reversal technique: For example, a clean freak can be asked to wear her dirty clothes for three consecutive days. An overly submissive person can be asked to be assertive during the session with

others.

7.6 Rehearsal exercise: Many of the roles we play in society are rehearsed in fantasy and when it comes to actual performance we falter out of fear. When the clients openly share their rehearsal loud with the therapist or the group, they begin to understand the dynamics of the rehearsal.

7.7 Exaggerating exercise: Usually clients communicate through their movements, postures, and gestures, which have meaning. These non-verbal behaviours can be exaggerated which intensifies the feeling attached to them and makes the inner meaning clearer. Trembling, shaking hands and legs, slouched posture and bent shoulders, clenched fists, tight frowning, facial grimacing, crossed arms are all some of the gestures that can be exaggerated. In the same way clients can be asked to repeat certain words or statements they used louder and louder.

7.8 Staying with the feeling: We usually avoid unpleasant situations and feelings. Clients want to avoid unpleasant feelings. The therapist can ask the clients to stay with whatever feelings they are currently having and thus go deeper into them, gain courage to face them and be willing to endure the pain necessary for unblocking and making way for newer levels of growth.

7.9 Gestalt approach to dream work: Unlike in psychoanalysis, in Gestalt therapy the dreamer is asked to narrate the dream in the present as though reliving the dream in the present. The dreamer can also be asked to identify himself/herself with any one of the dream elements and to carry on a dialogue. It is assumed that different parts of a dream are expressions of one's own contradictory and inconsistent sides. Thus every person and every object in the dream is the projected part of the dreamer. For Freud, dream is the royal road to the unconscious, whereas for Perls it is the royal road to integration. For Perls dream serves as an excellent way to discover personality voids by revealing missing parts and the client's methods of avoidance.

8. Summary

- Gestalt therapy is a form of Existential psychotherapy established by Frederick (Fritz) Perls and Laura Perls in the 1940s.
- It focuses on the phenomenological method of awareness, where feeling, perceiving, and acting are differentiated from interpreting and reshuffling the preexisting attitudes of individual.
- Clients and therapists *dialogue*, or communicate their phenomenological perspectives.
- Differences in perspectives become the focus of experimentation and continued dialogue.
- The goal for clients is to become aware of their 'self' in terms of what and how they are doing, and how they could change themselves, and learn self-acceptance and value themselves.
- Gestalt therapy focuses more on process (what is happening) than content (what is being discussed).
- The emphasis is on what is being done, thought and felt at the moment rather than on what was, might be, could be, or should be.
- Gestalt therapy has attracted people who were looking for quick solutions as well attracted a substantial number of solid, experienced clinicians who have found it only a powerful psychotherapy but also as practical life philosophy.
- Gestalt therapy is expected to take its position along with other substantive psychotherapies in the next few decades and has pioneered many useful and creative innovations in the field of psychotherapy.
- Gestalt therapy is gradually moving towards further explanation and improvement of the principles including existential dialogue, the use of the direct phenomenological experience of client and therapist, the trust of organismic self-regulation, the emphasis on experimentation and

awareness, the "no shoulds" attitude by the therapist, and the responsibility of the client and therapist for their own choices which form a model of good psychotherapy.

