

# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Theory in Counseling and Psychotherapy

## Perls, Fritz

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Fritz Perls (1883–1970), codeveloper (with his wife, Linda Perls) of Gestalt therapy, was born to lower-middle-class German Jewish parents in Berlin, Germany. He grew up before World War I and then lived through the chaos of the Weimar Republic—a time of great economic stress, hyperinflation, and [p. 762 ↓ ] the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazism in the early 1930s. He served as a medical officer in the German army during World War I, developing an abhorrence for war and causing his politics to drift decidedly to the left.

After completing medical school in 1920, Perls was living and working in Berlin, immersed in his friendship circle of artists, philosophers, poets, intellectuals, and, especially, members of the Bauhaus movement. He began his own psychoanalysis with Karen Horney, which was soon interrupted when Perls left Berlin in 1926 to work with Kurt Goldstein in Frankfurt. When Perls moved to Frankfurt from Berlin, he continued his analysis with Clara Happel, a student of Horney, and it was around this time that he began training in psychoanalysis. Perls and Horney, however, maintained a strong connection, with Horney being Perls's mentor, supervisor, colleague, and friend; years later, in 1946, Horney supported Fritz and Laura Perls's move to New York City.

In Frankfurt, Perls worked as an assistant to Kurt Goldstein, M.D., and the Gestalt psychologist Adhemar Gelb, Ph.D., at the Frankfurt Neuropsychiatric Institute, where Goldstein and Gelb were treating World War I soldiers as organized wholes (heavily influenced by Gestalt psychology), not just as body parts and pieces needing fixing. While in Frankfurt, Perls met Lore Posner (aka, Laura Perls), a doctoral student at the university working in Goldstein's lab.

The zeitgeist in Frankfurt in the 1920s was teeming with influences from existentialism, phenomenology, wholism, Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, behaviorism, somatics, and Bauhaus design. Well-known philosophers, psychologists, and psychiatrists, such as Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Kurt Goldstein, Adhemar Gelb, and Max Wertheimer, were all living and working there. Laura Perls worked and studied with Buber and Tillich as well as the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl for her doctoral studies and contributed much to Fritz's formulation of Gestalt therapy theory—although frequently not sufficiently credited. Fritz was also influenced by Kurt Lewin (field theory), Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Köhler, and Prime Minister Jan Smuts (who was also

a philosopher) in South Africa and by Harry Stack Sullivan, Erich Fromm, and Clara Thompson in the United States.

The intellectual and bohemian culture of Frankfurt around 1926 was similar to that of Paris in the next decade. Fritz Perls and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Laura Perls were some of the connective tissue between what was, what was coming, and what might be. They were trained by the generation of psychoanalysts who were going beyond Sigmund Freud and integrating Freud's work with some of the swirl of voices being heard around them, adding their own idiosyncratic perspectives to the evolving mix. In addition to his intellectual pursuits, Fritz was also influenced by the famous German theater director, Max Reinhardt, with whom he studied acting in Berlin.

In 1927, Perls left Frankfurt for Vienna to complete his psychoanalytical studies, which he did in 1928. He returned to Berlin and set up his practice as a Freudian psychoanalyst for the next several years. Beyond his short analysis with Horney in Berlin, Perls, on Horney's recommendation, had a personally and professionally rewarding analysis with Wilhelm Reich, who heavily influenced him.

In 1929, Fritz and Laura Perls married in Berlin and had their first child, Renate, in 1931. Because of their subversive political activities protesting the rising National Socialist dictatorship and because they were Jewish, the couple left Nazi Germany one night in 1934. They lived and tried to work in Holland, but without work permits and because of the poor economy and large number of refugees, they found it difficult to survive in Holland. Ernest Jones, the first English-speaking psychoanalyst and president of the International Psychoanalytic Association, offered a position to Perls if he would emigrate to South Africa and establish a psychoanalytical training institute there. Perls, it is said, without asking anything much about the arrangements (logistics, money, structure, contract, etc.) immediately agreed, so the couple left for South Africa in 1935.

Materially and professionally, Fritz and Laura Perls flourished in South Africa: having another child (Steven), establishing a psychoanalytical training institute, building a Bauhaus home, writing, and so forth. In 1936, Perls went to the Psychoanalytic Conference in Czechoslovakia and presented on "Oral Resistances." His paper was coldly received; Perls often told the story of being queried and chided by an official of the International Psychoanalytic Association as to whether he didn't [p. 763 ↓ ] believe

that all resistance was anal. Perls shot back that he didn't know psychoanalysis was based on "belief"! Soon after, Fritz and Laura Perls's certification as training analysts in South Africa was revoked by the association's ruling that only people who had already been trainers in Europe could be trainers outside Europe. Perls was disheartened and angry as he wanted to become an important innovator in the modernization of psychoanalysis.

In South Africa, Perls was influenced by the philosophical, holistic writings of Prime Minister Jan Smuts. Anticipating Smuts's retirement in 1948 and the next ruling party to be the Nationalists, who were to introduce apartheid, Perls emigrated to New York City in 1946. He was sponsored by Horney, who now lived there. Laura Perls and their two children followed in 1947.

In New York City, Perls found a group of analysts at the William Alanson White Institute who were most congruent with his views. This group, which primarily followed the teachings of Sullivan, was crucial to Perls's theoretical development. Sullivan, the innovator of interpersonal psychoanalysis, confirmed Perls's ideas about the relationship of any organism, from an amoeba to a person, to the field (organismic/ environmental field, or ecology) being crucial to the understanding of that organism. During this period, Perls was both influenced by and had influence on the William Alanson White Institute faculty.

While in New York, Perls met the philosopher, author, and social commentator Paul Goodman, who was in therapy with Laura Perls. Perls collaborated with Goodman and Ralph Hefferline (a Columbia University psychology professor who was also in therapy with Laura Perls) on rewriting one of Fritz's manuscripts that was published in 1951 as the seminal text *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (eventually known as *PHG*). Most people believe that Hefferline organized the exercises section of the book, while Perls and Goodman collaborated on the theoretical section, with many ascribing much of the theory to Goodman. Importantly, many of the theoretical roots of Gestalt therapy in *PHG* can be found in Perls's earlier writings. Fritz and Laura Perls began training therapists in New York in the late 1940s and officially established the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy in 1952.

With the publication of *PHG*, Perls was invited to present his work across the United States, stimulating the creation of Gestalt therapy institutes in Cleveland (with Erv Polster, Edwin, Sonia Nevis, etc.) and later in Los Angeles (with Jim Simkin and Bob Resnick) and San Francisco (with Abe Levitsky), to name a few of the larger ones.

Perls left New York City in 1956 and bounced around for several years from Miami, to San Francisco, to Los Angeles, finally going on a round-the-world trip and ending up living at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, where he and Simkin established training in Gestalt therapy for hundreds of therapists.

Perls's disregard for professional boundaries created a lot of confusion in discriminating between Gestalt therapy and Perls's personality, resulting in a bad reputation in some quarters for Gestalt therapy. For instance, Perls's sexual escapades with women, his sometimes outrageous behavior, and his unpredictable, strong reactions were often erroneously attributed to Gestalt therapy when they actually reflected Perls's complex and contradictory personality. His deficits sometimes detracted from his genius, creativity, sweetness, and generosity. Gestalt therapists, as other professional therapists, follow the ethical codes of their professional organizations.

Perls was a mischievous dialectician who would provoke the status quo by going to an extreme position. For example, in response to what he saw as the overly socialized, conforming, and intellectual zeitgeist of America in the 1950s, he would say things such as "The intellect is the whore of intelligence" and "Lose your mind and come to your senses." Unless one understood the context of these remarks—attempting to rebalance the issues of conformity or independent thinking and the overuse of the intellect at the expense of emotions and sensations—it could be easy to dismiss Perls as just a simplistic troublemaker.

Few psychotherapy theorists were influenced by so many and in turn influenced so many others themselves. Many of Perls's cutting-edge ideas in his early days have been integrated into most contemporary psychotherapies.

Perls remained at Esalen until 1969 and then moved to Lake Cowichan, Canada, to establish the first Gestalt community. Having traveled to Chicago after an opera tour of Europe, he died [p. 764 ↓ ] there on March 14, 1970, at the age of 78. Perhaps

apocryphal, his last words to a postsurgery nurse who was trying to stop him from pulling tubes out of his body were “Don’t *you* tell *me* what to do!”

**See also** [Gestalt Therapy](#); [Horney, Karen](#); [Psychoanalysis](#); [Reich, Wilhelm](#)

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