

An introduction to Fritz Perls' dream interpretation techniques



Figure 7.1: Fritz Perl

How can we fail to project ourselves into each and every dream thought? When we dream of our mothers, for example, is that dream image – as vivid and lifelike as it may be – really our mother? Is it really her words or script? Of course not. This tendency to project, however, is so strong that we often fail to realize we have done so. Freud postulated that *projection* was an unconscious ego defense, where we take unwanted or undesired self-traits and attribute them to others. Because the process takes place so quickly and automatically, we remain unaware that projection has even taken place.

I will give some examples. The first is a demonstration that has never failed in

my general psychology class for over two decades. Look at the following two figures:



Now, decide which one is happy and which one is out on parole for murder. Without any additional instructions and without any hesitation, 95% or more of every class decides that the circle is happy and the triangle is murderous. Then I stare at them in disbelief, while they typically giggle at their own folly. People, I say to them, these are drawings of chalk on a blackboard (or black ink on a whiteboard). They are not alive! They have no feelings, neither happy ones nor murderous ones. Then I point out that if they can project personality traits that easily upon the simplest of chalk drawings, imagine how more complicated our projections could be upon vivid dream images, and that includes both animate and inanimate images.

Another common example of projection occurs when we *anthropomorphize* (attaching human attributes to nonhuman things or animals). There was an eloquent story in a nonscientific magazine of a person who observed a funeral procession...among ants. The author courageously told the story of how the dead little worker ant was held aloft by its comrades in a solemn procession, carried sadly out of the main hole, and down the sides of the hill. Although scientists are not absolutely certain, it does not appear that ants are capable of anywhere near the same emotional sadness that humans feel. Furthermore, studies have shown that ants simply find the smell of a dead ant aversive (apparently the smell arises from decaying acids). In fact, if you take the decaying chemical and spray it on a live ant, that live ant will also be held aloft by its comrades and carried out of the anthill. People frequently anthropomorphize their pets, but it can be done as well with plants, cars, houses, or sports equipment. Again, if we can anthropomorphize animals, plants, or material possessions, imagine how easy it is for humans to attribute their own personality traits onto the vivid images in their dreams.

The modern discipline of behavior genetics has also shown that the largest factor contributing to the total sum of an individual's behavior comes from genetically based temperaments (e.g. Turkheimer, 2000). These temperaments are also mostly consistent across various situations and across one's lifespan (e.g. Heatherton and Weinberger, 1994). I believe that both factors may operate during dreaming. We probably project many of our deepest prejudices, biases, and offensive proclivities into our dream cast, script, and surroundings. Our dream themes will also be profoundly shaped by our ingrained, genetic predispositions to act and see ourselves act in very particular ways. Also, notice how these ingrained, genetic predispositions are consonant with Jung's notions of archetypes impelling behavior yet without a clear form.

It will be through dream interpretation that we will be able to become aware of these projections and underlying personality themes, and by becoming aware

of them we will move toward solving issues and problems. Almost all of the types of psychotherapies operate on the principle that awareness is curative. Think about it. Have the reasons why psychotherapy works been explicated? No. We know how to do psychotherapy. We know that it takes extensive training and experience, but the *why* largely eludes us. Still, psychotherapies are generally successful. That has been empirically demonstrated. Some are better than others; some are better than nothing. Yet, most psychotherapies operate on the ‘awareness is curative’ principle. How ironic. Thus, as you learn about these dream principles and make patients aware of their unconscious issues, relax and have faith in the knowledge by which most therapies operate: awareness is curative.

Gestalt therapy

Fritz Perls (1893–1970) was one of the founders of *Gestalt Therapy*, and he was a lively and controversial figure of this popular psychotherapy of the 1960s. His early influences included German neurologist Kurt Goldstein and highly controversial neo-Freudian Wilhelm Reich. In Perls’ book, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (1969a), he outlined in only 71 pages its philosophical bases in a series of public lectures. Whereas Freud believed that dreams were the royal road to the unconscious, Perls thought that dreams served as ‘the royal road to integration.’ Dreaming, for Perls, was the most spontaneous thing that people do. He thought that language, specifically the things that we typically said, were mostly types of shit: *chickenshit* consisted of trite phrases like hello, how are you, etc.; *bullshit* occurred mostly in response to asking a person: *why?* Because Perls, like Freud, believed that psychic events were overdetermined, that is, they have many causes, there was no possible way that someone could come up with *the* answer to *why* they had done something. Finally, in his spontaneous and provocative humor, he added *elephantshit*, for which he gave Gestalt Therapy as an example, and he reserved the term for grand theories.

‘So where was he coming from?’ as we said in the 1960s. Well, Perls believed, much like Zen monks, in the sacredness of the here and now. He thought a neurosis, for example, did indeed produce the symptom of anxiety. However, for him, anxiety prevents growth. He said in a lecture at his California institute, Esalen:

The stopping block seems to be anxiety. Always anxiety. Of course you are anxious if you have to learn a new way of behavior, and the psychiatrists usually are afraid of anxiety, they don’t know what anxiety *is*.

So the formula of anxiety is the gap between the *now* and *then*. If you are in the now, you can’t be anxious, because the excitement flows immediately into ongoing spontaneous activity. If you are in the now, you are creative, you are inventive. If you have your senses ready, if you have your eyes and ears open, like every small child, you find a solution.

(Perls, 1969a; p. 2–3)

Perls, much like Jung, also found that boredom was telling. For Perls, boredom resulted from blocking off genuine interests. Perls in his autobiography, *In and Out the Garbage Pail* (1969b), claimed that boredom even shaped his behavior as a therapist. It was boredom in therapeutic situations that motivated him to be obnoxious to people or be a caster of gloom. In other situations, he said it motivated him to flirt, be sexy, or to write his autobiography. In defense of Perls, he was nonetheless greatly loved despite his often gruff image and his putting of his patients in a 'hot seat' in front of hundreds of people. He actually believed in creative frustration, that is, placing people in situations that not only forced them into the *here and now* but also forced them to be real and not full of automatic trite phrases like, 'Hello, how are you?'

Topdog and underdog

Perls postulated another block to being able to live fully and freely was a war within the psyche between two parts which he called *topdog* and *underdog*. Perls imagined topdog as righteous and authoritarian (much akin to Freud's superego). Perls said topdog is 'sometimes right, but always righteous.' Topdog bullies our awareness with automatic prescriptions for living such as 'you should' and 'you should not.' Topdog also threatens our consciousness with demands and threats of catastrophe, such as 'you won't go to heaven if you don't do this,' etc. But Perls thought we have evolved a worthy adversary, underdog (akin to Freud's ego), who in some ways is even more dastardly clever. Underdog manipulates (or dominates) our awareness with being defensive, apologetic, and whiny. Underdog often defeats topdog by saying such things as 'I'm sorry,' and 'I tried but it's not my fault that I failed.' Also, underdog very cunningly places blame elsewhere and has us join organizations such as 'adult children of formerly abusive parents.' Perls firmly believed that even if you were hit with a potty chair in Cincinnati in 1957 by an alcoholic father, it is very well time to get over it. Perls believed that people should take responsibility for their actions right *now*. Perls felt that blaming others was unhealthy and blocked us from being psychologically free.

Perls thought that this self-torture game could even be carried to others. Perls noted that we usually automatically accept that topdog is always right and that we should be better humans, better children, better parents, etc. Yet, there is never any release from these demands for perfection from the topdog. Even if we have achieved some goal (e.g. perfect grades for a semester, getting a raise, etc.), topdog will immediately torture underdog with such lines as, 'Yes, but you'll never do that next semester,' or 'But you'll never get a raise that good again.' Furthermore, Perls thought that topdog always extends itself to others, and so we often berate others for failing to live up to our unreasonable expectations of them.

For Perls, these unrealistic expectations of ourselves and others are a damaging

fantasy. Yet, he said, we take the fantasy for reality: it is an impasse. Perls believed that the impasse could be broken through a *satori* (insight). And this *satori* might come through some awareness of *how* we are stuck. Undoubtedly, Perls also believed that these *satori* could come through the most spontaneous expression of our existence – that is, dreams.

The Gestalt prayer

Although it has been taken out of context and even ridiculed, Perls reiterated his Gestalt prayer. It was not meant to be a moral code for evaluating all human behavior. Its primary purpose was to free people of the continual disappointment we feel in ourselves and others when we, and others, fail to live up to the unrealistic expectations of topdog. The Gestalt prayer is:

I do my thing and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I,
And if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.
If not, it can't be helped.
(Perls, 1969a; p. 4)

When freed of the self-torture game, we have a greater sense of awareness. Perls always emphasized *how* rather than *why*. He thought answers to *why* would simply perpetuate our anxiety created by the gap between *now* and *then*. It would also perpetuate our continued failure to take responsibility for our own actions. For example, an overweight adult might blame his or her alcoholic father for driving him or her to equate food with love. Perls fought strongly to abandon that blaming game and the search for a *why*. Perls thought it much better to live in the present. Of course, living in the *here* and *now* is a continuum. We cannot always ignore where we have been or where we are going. However, Perls was undoubtedly right: people can spend too much time worrying about the past and future and ruining a perfectly good present.

Here and now

The contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (1991), stated this practice of the *here and now* eloquently and mundanely:

Washing dishes

To my mind, the idea that doing dishes is unpleasant can occur only when you aren't doing them. Once you are standing in front of the sink with your sleeves rolled up and your hands in the warm water, it is really quite pleasant. I enjoy taking my time with each dish, being fully aware of the dish, the water,

and each movement of my hands. I know that if I hurry in order to eat dessert sooner, the time of washing dishes will be unpleasant and not worth living. That would be a pity, for each minute, each second of life is a miracle. The dishes themselves and the fact that I am here washing them are miracles! If I am incapable of washing dishes joyfully, if I want to finish them quickly so I can go and have dessert, I will be equally incapable of enjoying my dessert. With the fork in my hand, I will be thinking about what to do next, and the texture and the flavor of the dessert, together with the pleasure of eating it, will be lost. I will always be dragged into the future, never able to live in the present moment.

Each thought, each action in the sunlight of awareness becomes sacred. In this light, no boundary exists between the sacred and the profane. I must confess it takes me a bit longer to do the dishes, but I live fully in every moment, and I am happy. Washing the dishes is at the same time a means and an end – that is, not only do we do the dishes in order to have clean dishes, we also do the dishes just to do the dishes, to live fully in each moment while washing them.

(Hanh, 1991; p. 26–7)

Gestalt therapy ingeniously linked this spontaneity of dreams to the spontaneity of the *here* and *now* in therapy. Furthermore, Perls firmly believed, as most therapists, that awareness, *per se*, was curative. The use of dreams in Gestalt therapy helped the person become aware of their problems. However, as an existential therapy, the purpose of Perls' dream techniques was not simply to find a 'problem.' Perls believed that people were systems that sought balance. He felt that imbalances were perceived as a need for correction, and stated:

Now, practically, we have hundreds of unfinished situations in us. How come we are not completely confused and want to go out in all directions? And that's another law which I have discovered, that from the survival point of view, the most urgent situation becomes the controller, the director, and takes over. The most urgent situation emerges, and in any case of emergency, you realize that this has to take precedent over any other activity.

And I believe that this is the great thing to understand: *that awareness per se – by and of itself – can be curative*. Because with full awareness you become aware of this organismic self-regulation, you can let the organism take over without interfering, without interrupting; we can rely on the wisdom of the organism. (Perls, 1969a; p. 15–16)

This notion of the inherent wisdom of the organism is consistent with the thinking of Carl Rogers (1902–1987), the humanist and founder of client-centered therapy. Rogers postulated a mental health motive, arising from the unconscious, that would impel people ultimately to correct themselves. That is why

in therapy, a client-centered therapist had no need to advise, suggest, or cajole a client into what the therapist believed was the correct decision. The natural and inherent wisdom of the organism would self-regulate and self-heal.

How exactly does this healing process occur? The word 'gestalt' in Gestalt therapy means 'form.' Perls saw a law that he felt was constant in the universe, that is, the tendency for the world and every organism to maintain itself, and 'the only law which is constant is the forming of gestalts – wholes, completeness.' A gestalt was an 'organic function' to Perls. A gestalt was the 'ultimate experiential unit.' A patient in therapy or people in one of Perls' workshops would, through their dreams, project the 'holes' of their personalities onto the therapist. They would project their hierarchies of unfinished issues onto the therapist. It would be the therapist's job to skillfully frustrate the patient to the point of confusion. The skillful part came where the therapist did not frustrate the patient to the point of depression nor let the patient get off too easily. Perls said:

If you become aware each time that you are entering a state of confusion, this is the therapeutic thing. And again, nature takes over. If you understand this, and stay with confusion, *confusion will sort itself out by itself*. If you *try* to sort it out, *compute* how to do it, if you ask me for a *prescription* how to do it, you only add more confusion to your productions.
(Perls, 1969a; p. 24)

Now, let us return to our original premise that everything in a dream is the dreamer and show how it is reflected in Gestalt therapy. Perls stated:

Now if my contention is correct, which I believe of course it is, all the different parts of the dream are fragments of our personalities. Since our aim is to make every one of us a wholesome person, which means a unified person, without conflicts, what we have to do is put the different fragments of the dream together. We have to *re-own* these projected, fragmented parts of our personality, and *re-own* the hidden potential that appears in the dream.
(Perls, 1969a; p.67)

I will explain the specific dream techniques with elaborate examples in later chapters. Presently, I feel it is necessary to explain the philosophy behind the techniques as a kind of prerequisite. The process of dream interpretation always reminds me of Jung's prescriptions for interpreting dreams:

I have no theory about dreams, I do not know how dreams arise. And I am not at all sure that my way of handling dreams even deserves the name of a 'method.' I share all your prejudices against dream-interpretation as the quintessence of uncertainty and arbitrariness. On the other hand, I know that if

we meditate on a dream sufficiently long and thoroughly, if we carry it around with us and turn it over and over, something almost always comes of it.
(Jung, 1970; p.74)

I especially like the imagery of turning a dream over and over. In what is probably my single favorite book *In Watermelon Sugar* by Richard Brautigan (1968; and not because it has a chapter entitled 'Fred'), the nameless hero meets Fred (his buddy) at dinner and relates the following:

Fred had something strange-looking sticking out of the pocket of his overalls. I was curious about it. It looked like something I had never seen before.

'What's that in your pocket, Fred?'

'I found it today coming through the woods up from the Watermelon Works. I don't know what it is myself. I've never seen anything like it before. What do you think it is?'

He took it out of his pocket and handed it to me. I didn't know how to hold it. I tried to hold it like you would hold a flower and a rock at the same time.

'How do you hold it?' I said.

'I don't know. I don't know anything about it.'

(Brautigan, 1968; pp. 6-7)

It makes me think the thing that Fred found might have been a metaphor for a dream. Contrast that dialogue with Jung's earlier writing:

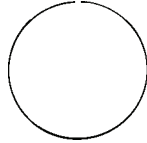
One would do well to treat every dream as though it were a totally unknown object. Look at it from all sides, take it in your hand, carry it about with you, let your imagination play round with it, and talk about it with other people.

So difficult is it to understand a dream that for a long time I have made it a rule, when someone tells me a dream and asks for my opinion, to say first of all to myself: 'I have no idea what this dream means.' After that I can begin to examine the dream.

(Jung, 1970; p. 64)

Dreams form a hierarchy of unfinished business.

Fritz Perls thought dreams were the most spontaneous expression of human existence, and now we are at the crux of perhaps the most important dream principle in this book (in my opinion). First, to appreciate experientially the theory behind Gestalt Therapy and this important principle, please examine the following figure:



What is this figure? If you said a circle, you are wrong. It is a curved line. It was intentionally drawn to leave a very small space so that the circle was not completed. Perls argued that humans have a strong tendency to see things as whole objects or complete forms. The word Gestalt means *form*. Psychology students have long had to memorize the *Zeigarnik effect*, which states that unfinished tasks are remembered better than finished tasks. This effect appears to be particularly true for tasks which we take personally or when the tasks are ego-involving. For example, we worry about studying for an upcoming test. Whether we study for the test is another issue but we tend to think about studying for it a lot. The worry introduces itself into our consciousness continually. However, tests we have just taken and done well on we tend to forget, or they do not occupy nearly as much time as the tests we are about to take.

Now let us all recall the second part of Perls' argument:

...[A]ll the different parts of the dream are fragments of our personalities. Since our aim is to make every one of us a wholesome person, which means a unified person, without conflicts, what we have to do is put the different fragments of the dream together. We have to *re-own* these projected, fragmented parts of our personality, and *re-own* the hidden potential.

(Perls, 1969a; p. 67)

Because of the phobic attitude, the avoidance of awareness, much material that is our own, that is part of ourselves, has been dissociated, alienated, disowned, thrown out. The rest of our potential is not available to us.

In summary, Perls suggested that our unfinished psychological issues form a hierarchy, or ranking. The unfinished psychological issues that are most important to us would move towards the top of the hierarchy and uncompleted psychological issues that were not as important would remain in the hierarchy, but at lower levels. The issues at the top of the hierarchy would be expected to make their way into our dreams repeatedly, perhaps by their recurrence in dreams. Thus, when listening to and helping a dreamer interpret their dreams, it would be important to first listen and form hypotheses as to what these higher-ranking psychological issues might be and then to help the dreamer become aware and re-own these fragmented parts of their personality. I will give numerous examples of how to accomplish the latter task in Chapter 11.

Summary

- 1 Dream images are probably replete with projections of our own personalities, unconscious and conscious issues and attitudes.
- 2 Fritz Perls, one of the founders of Gestalt Therapy, believed that dreaming was the most spontaneous of all human behaviors.
- 3 Perls thought anxiety was caused by a failure to stay in the 'here and now.'
- 4 Perls believed that all parts of a dream were projected fragments of our personalities.
- 5 Perls believed that our unfinished issues and problems formed a hierarchy which could be accessed through dream work.