
Good Moments in Gestalt Therapy: A Descriptive Analysis of two Perls Sessions

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Abstract

Two Gestalt therapy sessions conducted by Fritz Perls were analyzed using a category system that was recently developed for identifying in-session client behaviours that are valued by Gestalt therapists. Two hundred and ten client statements were independently rated by four judges. Descriptive analysis of the combined data revealed a common pattern of therapeutic movement. In both sessions, an initial phase dominated by *building block* good moments (focusing on client awareness, and expressing feeling directly to other) was followed by a phase characterized by combinations of good moments. Sustained bursts of these complex good moments led to the presence of *outcome* good moments in therapy. Differences between the two sessions were explored with respect to client characteristics, therapeutic alliance, and therapist interventions. The form and content of therapeutic interventions leading to good moments were examined.

Résumé

L'analyse descriptive des données des deux entrevues a permis de constater la présence d'un processus thérapeutique similaire. Le début des deux sessions, soit la première phase, était composée principalement par différents "bons moments" isolés. Ceux-ci constituent la pierre angulaire de la thérapie gestalt (prise de conscience, expression directe des sentiments). Dans la deuxième phase, on retrouvait des "bons moments" en combinaison. La présence continue de cette combinaison de "bons moments" reflétant l'aboutissement d'un processus thérapeutique (*outcome good moments*). Une analyse des différences entre les deux sessions fut effectuée en tenant compte des facteurs suivants: caractéristiques des clients, l'alliance thérapeutique et l'intervention particulière du thérapeute. La nature et la forme des interventions thérapeutiques donnant lieu à des "bons moments" furent également examinées.

Clinical researchers have recently developed category systems aimed at identifying and describing in-session client behaviours that are considered to represent therapeutically desirable or valued moments of movement and change. These category systems have been used to examine and compare the content and distribution of good moments across client-centered, rational-emotive, and experiential counselling sessions (Mahrer, Boulet & Stalikas, 1987; Mahrer, Nadler, Stalikas, Schachter & Sterner, 1988), and to describe the frequency and types of good moments within sessions from a specific counselling approach (Boulet, Soulière, Sterner & Nadler, in press; Mahrer, Nadler, Dessaulles, Gervaise & Sterner, 1987; Mahrer, Nadler, Gervaise, Sterner & Talitman, 1988).

However, the analysis of in-session good moments can also provide meaningful therapeutic information that could assist the clinician in the conduct of counselling sessions. Investigations of therapy sessions, espe-

cially those led by renowned and respected clinicians, could yield valuable insights into the specific nature and sequence of in-session client behaviours that appear to be encouraged and facilitated by outstanding therapists. In addition, examination of the therapeutic context and therapist behaviours that immediately precede each type of good moment could lead to the formulation of hypotheses concerning the counselling interactions that appear to be conducive to the emergence of valued in-session client behaviours. The potential benefits of such a research endeavour transcend the theoretical bounds of any particular counselling approach since the focus is on a wide range of good moments, some of which may be prized and valued by clinicians from varying orientations.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to conduct an intensive analysis of two counselling sessions conducted by a renowned therapist, Fritz Perls. Perls is recognized as the founder and a key exemplar of the Gestalt approach, and tapes of his interviews are frequently used in training. The Category System of Good Moments in Gestalt Therapy (Boulet et al., in press) was used to identify and describe the frequency, type, and distribution patterns of good moments that occurred within and across the sessions. The therapist interactions antecedent to the good moments were also examined in an attempt to shed some light on the therapeutic contexts which may facilitate the emergence of each type of good moment.

METHOD

Materials

Two one-session therapy interviews conducted by Fritz Perls were studied. The first session (Perls I) is the well known interview that Perls conducted with Gloria as part of a series of demonstrations for the film *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy* hosted by Everett Shostrom (1965). The second session (Perls II) is one offered through the American Academy of Psychotherapists (AAP) tape library entitled *I and Thou with Fritz Perls* (Perls, 1961). This is a one-session therapy interview conducted by Perls with Eugene Sagan as a client.

Verbatim transcripts from audiotapes of the two sessions were parsed into therapist and client statements according to the definition of a statement provided by Kiesler (1973), "... an uninterrupted sequence of sentences uttered by either patient or therapist" (p. 42). These statements, which may be thought of as natural speaking turns, formed the units of client in-therapy behaviour which were subjected to evaluation by judges.

Judges

Two male clinical psychologists and two female graduate students in clinical psychology served as judges. During approximately 10 hours of training, the four judges first read and discussed the Category System of Good Moments in Gestalt Therapy (Boulet et al., in press). Then, each judge independently rated four blocks of practice statements. These blocks were formed by dividing two practice sessions in half, based on the total number of client responses in each session. The predetermined agreement level required that the judges unanimously agree on at least 75% of their ratings for one block of practice statements. When this agreement level was not attained for one block of statements, the judges met to discuss their ratings and then independently rated another block of practice statements. Unanimous agreement on 78% of the practice statements was achieved on the fourth block of statements.

Measure

The Category System of Good Moments in Gestalt Therapy consists of 10 categories used to rate client verbal behaviours that are considered to represent valued instances of actual in-therapy change, or therapeutically important process from the perspective of Gestalt therapy. It was developed by a team of three researchers who reviewed the major theoretical, clinical, and research writings in Gestalt therapy (Boulet et al., in press). The research manual consists of operational definitions and clinical examples for each of the 10 categories of good moments: expressing an awareness of ongoing experiencing; expressing feelings directly to the other; enactment; expressing and/or staying with feelings /experiencing; experiential insight; emergency of previously blocked experiences, memories, or processes; taking responsibility and owning; ability to value and discriminate what one wants, needs, and desires; integration; and being the expanded self. Each category is rated dichotomously, i.e., each category is rated as either present or absent. The categories of good moments are assumed to reflect different dimensions of client performance and are therefore not considered to be mutually exclusive.

Procedure

The judges listened to audiotapes of each session while following with verbatim transcripts. Each judge independently rated all of the client responses using the Category System of Good Moments in Gestalt Therapy (Boulet et al., in press). Since the categories are not deemed to be mutually exclusive, each response unit could be rated as representing anywhere from none to all ten categories. Data analyses were conducted

on those good moments that were identified by at least three of the four judges.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Two hundred and ten client response statements were rated independently by the four judges. The kappas for the independent ratings on the 10-category system for all possible combinations of two judges ranged from .71 to .79. This indicated relatively high interjudge agreement levels for the combined 10 categories.

Proportion of Good Moments

Ninety-nine of the 210 client statements in the combined sessions were considered by at least 3 out of 4 judges to represent one or more categories of good moments. The total number of good moments was similar in the two sessions: 91 and 93 good moments were identified in the Perls I and Perls II sessions respectively. Hence, both sessions analyzed can be described as highly productive with respect to the generation of good moments. However, the proportion of client statements judged to represent one or more good moments (39.7% and 57% in the Perls I and Perls II sessions respectively) was significantly different across the two sessions: $X^2(1, N=210) = 6.40, p .01$. Possible explanations for the superiority of the Perls II sessions are explored in a later section.

Categories of Good Moments

The frequency of occurrence of each of the 10 categories for each of the sessions is presented in Table 1. In terms of the compositions of the pool of good moments occurring in the combined sessions, four categories (i.e., awareness of ongoing experiencing, expressing feelings directly to other, enactment, and expressing/staying with feelings) accounted for 95.7% of the total good moments. The predominance of these categories is consistent with Gestalt therapy's emphasis on the awareness and expression of immediate experiencing, the here and now interactive nature of Gestalt, and its mandate to make the past alive and real through enactment (Polster & Polster, 1973). Certainly, the client behaviours found in these four categories are encouraged by specific Gestalt interventions and constructs such as the two-chair exercise (cf. Fagan et al., 1974; Greenberg, 1979), the awareness continuum (Perls, 1973), experimentation (Greenberg, 1979), the contact episode (Polster & Polster, 1973) and the working through of the awareness cycle (Greenberg & Kahn, 1978). It is possible that these four categories represent the main working processes of Gestalt therapy. Along these lines, E. W. L. Smith (personal communication, June 28, 1990) has suggested that these four categories, along with the category defined as taking responsibility, may

TABLE 1
*Frequency Distribution and Percentage of the Total Good Moments
 in Each Session for Each Category*

CATEGORY	Perls I		Perls II		χ^2 ^a	p
	f	%	f	%		
Awareness of ongoing experiencing	23	25.3	11	11.8	1.67	.20
Expressing feelings directly to other	42	46.1	28	30.1	0.24	.62
Enactment	3	3.3	23	24.7	25.80	.000
Expressing/staying with feelings	20	22.0	26	28.0	4.82	.05
Experiential insight	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Emergence of blocked experiences	1	1.1	1	1.0		
Taking responsibility	1	1.1	2	2.2		
Valuing wants & needs	1	1.1	2	2.2		
Integration	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Being the expanded self	0	0.0	0	0.0		

^a $df = 1$

reflect the essence of the Gestalt process, whereas the remaining categories may actually measure the emergent outcome of the process.

In the two sessions analyzed, some of the "outcome" categories of good moments such as the emergency of blocked experiences, and valuing wants and needs, also appeared but they tended to be infrequent and scattered across the sessions. However, when these categories occurred after a sustained burst of client statements involving combinations of good moments, their presence was accompanied by a profound shift in the client's experiencing of self. For example, in the Perls I session, the client expresses to Perls that she wants him to respect her as a human being and to value her feelings (i.e., valuing and expressing wants and needs). This represents a dramatic shift in her contact with Perls, which until then had been characterized by him as being phoney. This state-

ment is preceded by seven consecutive client statements composed of combinations of good moments. Each of these preceding moments included expressing an awareness of ongoing experiencing and expressing feelings directly to others. Most of these preceding statements also included expressing and staying with the feeling/experiencing, and enactment was present in one of these preceding statements. In this example, a sustained period of therapist/client contact involving several of the basic elements of Gestalt therapy led to the presence of an outcome moment, an event that was judged to be of therapeutic significance.

Chi-square analyses indicated that the frequencies for two of the categories were significantly different across the two sessions (see Table 1). Compared to the client in the Perls I session, the client in the Perls II sessions appeared more likely and/or more willing to participate in good moments consisting of enactments and expressing /staying with feelings. The client Sagan was an experienced clinician and proponent of the Gestalt approach, and as such he may have been more willing to engage in the therapeutic process than Gloria who had relatively little experience with this approach.

Clusters of Good Moments

The majority of good moments did not occur as discrete events but tended to cluster together in groups of 2 or more in the same client statement. Of the total 99 client statements identified as depicting one or more categories of good moments, 39.4% were judged as representing a single good moment (simple good moments), and 60.6% were considered to represent two or more good moments (complex good moments).

Identical, recurring clusters of good moments were identified through a close examination of the data. Complex good moments varied from a total of two to four good moments for one client statement. The majority of recurring complex good moments were identified as belonging to one of four different clusters. The composition and frequency of these four clusters are presented in Table 2. Chi-square analysis indicated that the frequencies of two of these clusters were significantly different across the two sessions (see Table 2). Compared to the client in the Perls I session, the client in the Perls II session seemed more likely to participate in in-session activities involving a combination of expressing feelings directly to other, enactments, and expressing/staying with feelings, but less likely to demonstrate in-session behaviours involving a combination of awareness of ongoing experiencing, and expressing feelings directly to other. These findings may also be, in part, a reflection of the differences between clients but as explored later, session differences with respect to the quality of the relationship between client and therapist, and therapist interventions may have played a role.

TABLE 2
*Composition and Frequency of Recurring Clusters of Good Moments
 in Each Session*

Clusters	Perls I	Perls II	χ^2	p
	f	f		
Awareness of ongoing experiencing, and expressing feelings directly to other	20	4	10.40 ^a	.006
Expressing feelings directly to other, and expressing/staying with feelings	19	21	2.91 ^a	.26
Awareness of ongoing experiencing, expressing feelings directly to other, and expressing/staying with feelings	9	2	4.86 ^b	.18
Expressing feelings directly other, enactment, and expressing/staying with feelings	1	9	11.01 ^b	.02

^a df = 2

^b df = 3

Apart from the four clusters described above, other combinations of complex good moments occurred but their frequencies were never higher than 1. However, there appeared to be greater variability in the composition of complex good moments in the Perls II session. In the Perls II session there were 12 different combinations of good moments whereas in the Perls I session there were only 7 different combinations.

Phases of Good Moments

The overall frequency of occurrence of good moments progressed over the course of both sessions. In each session, virtually the only categories that occurred in the first 25 to 30 client statements were awareness of ongoing experiencing, and expressing feelings directly to other; these categories continued to occur to the end of both sessions. Consistent with previous literature (cf. Elliott, 1983; Kicsler, Klein & Mathieu, 1965; Rice

& Greenberg, 1984) these findings indicated that client process was not homogeneous or uniform over time, but that there were certain interactions which seemed to stand out as being more active and therapeutic than others. The low overall frequency and the limited variety of good moments that occurred in the first 25 to 30 client statements indicated that the sessions appeared to start relatively slowly. During this phase, the clients progressively began to engage in activities aimed at increasing their experiential awareness of the immediate situation, and expressing their feelings directly to the relevant other. This pattern of client behaviour is consistent with Gestalt theory which maintains that Gestalt sessions begin with a focus on the client's awareness and his/her blocks to awareness (cf. Greenberg & Kahn, 1978; Perls, 1973; Poslter & Polster, 1973).

In addition to the higher frequency and diversity of good moments after the first 25 to 30 client statements, complex good moments also began to appear with greater consistency. The increased frequency of complex good moments may provide another indication that a different phase of therapy is beginning in which the client is getting progressively more involved in the therapeutic process.

Antecedent Client and Therapist Interactions

In order to begin to shed some light on the clinical contexts that may be conducive to, or promote therapeutic movement, the therapist and client statements antecedent to the emergence of good moments were carefully analyzed. The focus was primarily on attempting to specify the therapist interventions which appeared to facilitate different types of good moments. This intensive analysis was conducted for the four most frequently occurring categories of good moments: awareness of ongoing experiencing; expressing feelings directly to other; enactments; and expressing/staying with feelings/experiencing.

In awareness of ongoing experiencing, the client attends to and describes his/her ongoing experiencing and current awareness of the self or of the environment. Two distinct, but somewhat related, therapist interventions tended to precede this particular good moment: drawing the client's attention to certain aspects of nonverbal experience, and confronting the client with incongruities between verbal and nonverbal communication. For example, in a scene in which the client is expressing her reluctance to be vulnerable in front of the therapist, Perls says "Are you aware that your eyes are moist?", and in a scene where the client is expressing fear of the therapist, Perl says "You say you are scared, but you are smiling. I don't understand how one could be scared and smile at the same time." These interventions had the effect of expanding the client's awareness of her total experience.

In expressing feelings directly to the other, the client is required to refrain from talking about the other and to express himself/herself directly to the other in a genuine fully-felt manner. In the sessions analyzed, the expression of feelings directly to other was often sustained over many consecutive client statements. The emergence of this good moment was frequently preceded by direct requests from the therapist to engage in this activity; however, it was sometimes provoked by confrontations from the therapist. For example, in the Perls I session, when the client said that she did not know how she felt, Perls responded "Playing stupid." Kiesler and Goldston (1988) have reported that the relationship between Perls and Gloria was primarily one of mistrust, hostility, and competitiveness. Thus these bursts of expressing feeling directly to other in the Perls I session may have been facilitated by Perls' persistent confrontations which appeared to make the client more self-conscious and increased her anger towards the therapist. The confrontative and challenging tone of the therapeutic alliance in the Perls I session may, therefore, have been responsible for the significantly greater frequency of complex good-moment client statements involving the awareness of ongoing experiencing and expression of feeling directly to other, that was found in this session. In addition, the use of positive reinforcement may have encouraged the client to continue. For example, after the client genuinely expressed her resentment toward the therapist Perls said "Wonderful. Thank you. You didn't squirm for the last minute."

In enactments, clients are expected to set aside their manifest personality and fully identify with previously censored aspects of self. Enactments occurred consistently in the Perls II session, but not in the Perls I session. As has previously been noted, the client in the Perls II session was also more willing to engage in therapeutic activity involving complex good moments consisting of expressing feeling directly to other, enactment, and staying with feeling, and in this session the enactment category of good moments occurred more frequently than in the Perls I session. These differences may be an interactive function of three variables: 1) therapist interventions, 2) client characteristics, and 3) tone of the therapist client relationship. With respect to therapist interventions, Perls consistently requested enactments from both clients, but these requests were somewhat more frequent in the Perls II session (four requests in Perls I session, as compared to six in the Perls II session).

In addition, there were indications that the client in the Perls II session, Sagan, was more receptive to engaging in enactment interventions than was the client in the Perls I session, Gloria;—a) Sagan was more likely than Gloria to comply with Perls' request for enactments, b) Sagan's enactments tended to be more prolonged (one to nine client statements) than Gloria's statements which never lasted beyond one client statement, and c) Sagan sustained his enactments until Perls

terminated the episode, whereas Gloria always self-terminated. Other authors have suggested that individual differences may influence clients' ability to fully participate in, and benefit from, the therapeutic process (cf. Strupp, 1980a, 1980b). Furthermore, the tone of the relationship that the two clients had with Perls was also different. During the session, Sagan expressed his admiration for Perls and his work, whereas the relationship between Perls and Gloria has been described as mistrustful and hostile. Thus Gloria was probably not as receptive to Perls' direction to engage in enactment.

Expressing and staying with the feeling/experiencing involves the client allowing feelings to continue to occur, to develop, deepen, or change, rather than avoiding feeling. This category tended to occur more frequently in the Perls II session. In the Perls I session this good moment was preceded by a variety of therapist interventions, such as asking the client to repeat affect laden statements, directing the client toward her ongoing nonverbal behaviour, and confronting her game playing. In the Perls II sessions there was a more consistent pattern of therapist interventions leading to expressing and staying with feelings. Many of the instances of expressing and staying with feeling in the Perls II session occurred during client statements that also involved enactment. In these instances, Perls directed the client to continue and deepen his involvement in the enactment and this appeared to facilitate the client maintaining the feeling being expressed. In other instances of staying with feeling in this session, Perls used interventions such as directing the client to repeat affect laden statements, and directing the client's awareness to incongruities in his verbal and nonverbal behaviour. The greater frequency of staying with feeling in the Perls II session may be due to the greater frequency of sustained emotionally laden enactment in this session, and Sagan's greater willingness to comply with therapist directions.

SUMMARY

In general, the therapist interventions found to frequently precede the presence of the building block good moments in Gestalt therapy included directing the client's awareness to ongoing experiencing, to nonverbal behaviour or to incongruities between verbal and nonverbal behaviour, confronting the client's game playing, and directing the client to engage in enactments involving the direct expression of feeling to other. It would appear that these basic Gestalt interventions do often herald moments valued in Gestalt therapy. Therefore, clinicians may wish to consistently implement these interventions in order to facilitate such good moments.

In the present study, a discovery oriented approach was adopted in an attempt to begin to shed light on the client behaviours and processes that

may be consistent across Gestalt sessions. While firm conclusions cannot be drawn based on a sample size of two, the similarity of major patterns across the two sessions suggests various avenues that could be pursued in subsequent research into the structure and process of Gestalt therapy.

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