

# Psychological Nutrition

**Adelma do Socorro Gonçalves Pimentel**

Graduate Program in Psychology, Federal University of Pará, Pará, Brazil  
Email: [adelmapi@ufpa.br](mailto:adelmapi@ufpa.br)

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## Abstract

**This essay renders concepts of psychological nutrition such as the concepts of emotional and social nourishments that guide the psychosocial integration of the human being in the world, and the concept of emotional hunger. The categories are based on some proposals from the Gestalt-therapy: dental and mental metabolisms; on assumptions from the Gestalt psychology about psychological and organic isomorphism and on the concept of theory of complexity.**

## Keywords

**Psychological Nutrition, Isomorphism, Complexity**

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## 1. Introduction

Since completion of my doctoral studies (2000) I have concentrated on examining the works of Frederick Salomon Perls, the indicators found on the human development that suggest the appropriation of the concept of isomorphism to psychological and organic fields. The questions that have directed my search are: which combination(s) can be established between psychological dynamics and organic functioning? Which factors support the correlation between chewing and personality profiles: psychologically nourished or not?

To answer those questions I regularly revise the literature on isomorphism, I listen to informers (children, adolescents and adults), and I share with my colleagues the conclusions obtained from the hermeneutics of the texts, hoping to continue refining the concept of psychological nutrition, the object of this essay, and to contribute to the education of the gestalt-therapist: physician, professor and researcher.

Considering the limitations of the theories outlined by Perls, the context in which the Gestalt-therapy emerged and the author's psychoanalytical education (among other factors), the arguments of this text are built on: notions from the Gestalt psychology (Kohler, 1968, 1978); the studies on complexity (Abreu Junior, 2001), (Domingues, 2005), (Morin, 2005); and interviews with children (Pimentel, 2003, 2005; Pimentel & Pedroso, 2004).

As for the theory of complexity, I adopt the following theses: knowledge through the net and multicultural knowledge; abolition of pre-established borders, surpassing the modern scientific proposal of tree knowledge

Abreu Junior (2001) sharing of unifying methodologies and occupation of zones of uncertainty and domains of ignorance in different areas of knowledge. Domingues (2005) described the three principles: 1) Dialogic... That allows us to keep duality within the unity. He associates two terms that are simultaneously complementary and adverse; 2) Organizational recursion... It is an idea that means a rupture with the linear idea of cause/effect, product/producer, and structure/superstructure; 3) The hologramatic principle... The idea goes beyond reductionism that perceives the most basic, the parts only, and holism, that is viewed as wholes (Morin, 2005).

## 2. The Study's Base

The text results from research orientated by the logic configuration whose point of reference: "Is characterized by the researcher's theoretical production before a group of influences which does not express an explicit order, among which are their own ideas before each one of the moments of confrontation with the empiric." (González-Rey, 2002: p. 129).

The investigation paradigm is ontologic (Moreira, 2006), that is, appropriate to the nature of the problem that I approach: critical reflection concerning the dental and mental metabolism; it is exploratory while I try to enlarge Perls' study (1975); it aims to refine concepts, to problematize the psychosocial nutrients that can supply children's, adolescents' and adult's needs for later use in clinical practice in psychology of developmental disorders; it is methodologically qualitative.

The categories psychological nutrition and emotional hunger (Pimentel & Pedroso, 2004, Pimentel, 2005, 2007) were elaborated from verification performed with children and adults: elementary school and psychology and nutrition area teachers of the Federal University of Pará-UFPA and University of Porto in Portugal. The syntheses that I present express the productivity of the thought that tries to give sense and clinical application to the metaphor of dental and mental metabolism.

## 3. Physiological and Psychological Isomorphism

Perls (1979) sustained that structure and psychological function are identical things and that they operate together. If one changes, the other changes, too. This assumption has an isomorphic character.

Isomorphism is a concept derived from mathematics. In mathematics, the premise is a one-to-one correspondence. Each element of a system corresponds only to the other element of the system, preserving the structure, Luchins & Luchins (1999). However, the bases of the isomorphic theses for the Gestalt-therapy prescribed in Perls are also in the researches made by Kofka, Kohler and Wertheimer.

Wertheimer did not believe only in Gestalt theory in relation to conscious events, but he believed in the Gestalt theory in its physiological base. The central physiological processes could not be seen as a sum of elements, but as processes of a whole. Therefore, Köhler sees it as a precursor of isomorphism. Later on, when Köhler constructs the physical Gestalten, based on his better knowledge of the subject, Wertheimer and Koffka simply recognize him as a further step in the theory, common to the three of them. Köhler, 1920/1938 a in Engelmann (2002).

Luchins & Luckins assure that in psychology it is not the one-to-one correspondence that is demanded, but the similarity of structures. In the same text, they present Kofka's ideas, who questioned physiology as the basis of isomorphism, defending that the relationship between behavior and the physiological field is fundamental; they also present Wertheimer's thesis, whose isomorphic solution was not to regard the physiological processes in a molecular way, but as molar phenomena; and, finally, Kohler's ideas on the psychophysic isomorphism.

Perls' theses (1975) are based upon: a) the idea of primary formation of the picture and secondary formations; b) picture and background are elements of the field; c) holistic and isomorphic understanding of the organism to surpass the principle of psychophysic parallelism, that supported the idea that the physical and psychological functions act separately. Such ideas were institutionalized by the group of the Gestaltica School of Berlin.

Thus, Perls elaborated the isomorphic face, which is the basis for the concept of mental metabolism, and concluded:

(...) El hambre de alimento mental y emocional se comporta como el hambre física Perls (1975: p. 144) (...) debemos estar plenamente conscientes del hecho de que estamos comiendo, (p, 250) ( ) El conocimiento de los detalles y la plena conciencia del proceso de comer colaborará para producir el cambio requerido em su alimento. Se desarrollará el buen gusto y cesará de introyectar su alimento físico, y em forma similar, el

mental (p. 252).

Perls (1975, 1997) stated that a child birth is the beginning of the continuous existential task of the human being to remain alive, being the bay's role, although depending on the mother, to perform the dependence biting, in other words, the active role that precedes chewing. When baby teeth appear, active function increases and the child learns to bite the mother's chest, reaching two possible resolutions for this act: a) biting is either frequently physically inhibited by the mother, which culminates in a sick learning that installs a not so frequent repayment trauma, or less serious, traumatic frustration; b) or the child is directed toward biting (not the mother's breast), as a way of carrying through the impulse that will be important to the development of the functions and borders of the self, and to a healthy and creative psychological development.

Perls (1975) associated the development of the hunger instinct with dental growth and conceives three training periods: a) the pre-natal period: before birth; b) pre-dental: sucking; c) dental: incisor, biting; molar: biting and chewing. He believed that the ability to chew foods is a natural biological exit to the healthy growth, as well as to the suitable use of the biological aggression. The latter is a function responsible for the real emotional contact between the human being and the world.

These ideas made me understand that healthy emotional and social development occur when the child is guided to remain active using teeth and the positive aggressiveness when chewing mental food. Perls was not worried about defining physiological and psychological isomorphism. However, he delineated the analogy between the processes with a view to drawing a system to deal with psychism.

#### 4. Psychological Nutrition

The concept of Psychological Nutrition, (Pimentel, 2003, 2005; Pimentel & Pedroso, 2004), is based upon the dental metabolism thesis found in Perls (1975). He believed that the use of teeth and the positive aggressiveness were very important to the development of the child and to the psychological formation of a healthy adult. Dental metabolism is based on the gestaltist principle of Isomorphism that suggests a similarity between physical and mental processes. Thus, the author proposed an analogy between the processes of destruction of organic food and destruction of psychological food.

We shall not forget that this thesis began in Perls' practical clinic in the 50s. I have been studying the way children are educated by the family and at school, aiming to identify which psychological foods contribute to their creative formation of self-esteem and self-concept. Thus, after listening to children, the term psychological nutrition was coined, which means the emotional food provision that forms the basis for creative adjustment. A child who receives such provisions accomplishes a process of psychological metabolization where the teeth contribute with the quality of their functions to the actions of the Self, that is, proportionally, they break in parts, cut, tear and triturate orientations and information contained in the family education and in the socialization standards of the culture where the child lives in.

The analogy with isomorphism is limited because: when the child is 6 years old chewing efficiency increases by approximately 40%, but it does not reach the adult level until the age of 16; children and adolescents tend to swallow food in great portions since their digestive system is capable of handling great food pieces, Neto (2003) 11. Therefore, I believe that psychological nutrition is a process: a) slower than the organic one, because it depends on people who offer ways of learning directed towards autonomy; b) that becomes more and more refined, or updates itself, because as children grow up, they become more and more aware of themselves and of the existing complexity in social relationships.

So that, in order for children and adolescent to carry out the metabolization process in the dynamics of the psychological nutrition, there is a succession of linked stages: a) learn how to identify their own needs, appreciate and classify food received and how caretakers offer them; b) to be aware of the personal power to evaluate and to choose c) to opt for nutritional substances in order to acquire psychological independence; d) to recognize Subjectivity and Alterity as independent instances, but in relation to each other; e) to form a strong self-esteem and self-concept.

Although the cognitive processes of abstraction are associated with adolescence, I believe they should be understood as experiences in a set of transformations: biological, subjective and social. This approach permits to consider that cognitive processes are connected to a learning sequence, which begins in childhood, at home, in school, in peer groups, with important and reliable individuals.

The more the child learns to chew, to cut, to swallow and to expel the foods, the healthier its Psychological

Nutrition will be. These actions should not lead to isolation and stigmatisation of the child. A result of this learning can be self-expression free from the pressures to standardize taste and capacity to choose. When choosing, the child becomes the subject in the language, in the thought, in its personal relations and projects—all these processes are activated by intention [González Rey \(2002: p. 33\)](#). Hence, the adolescent will reveal self-assuredness, being capable of saying yes or no, according to each existential context. To sum up, psychologically well-nourished children may face the limits imposed by white culture, that denies children and old people the right to speak. The world of the valued word and production still belongs to adults.

## 5. Emotional Hunger

Preventing emotional hunger may prevent the development of sick ways of relating to food in children and, above all, in adolescents: hunger of nothing or Anorexia; massive hunger or bulimia and compulsory hunger whose traces can be seen in bulimia and obesity.

Hunger and appetite are regulated by the central nervous system and culture. The sensation of hunger derives from metabolic stimulations, from peripheral receivers and from the wide offer of attractive products (not always adequate, but tasty) provided by the food industry. Satiation is set in motion in a region located in the hypothalamus. It is the cultural aspect that reiterates the transmission of the interactional value of the act of eating, that is, food prompts people to meet around the table: celebrating birthdays, marriages, baptisms, etc. In any meeting, food is present in different forms and amounts. It is also a source of isolated pleasure when interactions are difficult or conflicting. Thus, food becomes the center in people's existence.

Emotional hunger is regulated by the gaps resulting from family carelessness by the parents or caretakers in emotional, educational and social areas. Thus, it may be defined as: lack of love, which comes from constant emotional abandonment of individuals by their family members and by significant members of the community to which they belong. Emotional hunger has the following signs: a) low self-esteem, lack of love, recognition, or admiration; b) solitude in the middle of a crowd; c) incapacity to start and finish projects; d) lack of affection, attention, and incentive; e) little value, self-depreciation and negative self-image; f) and incomprehension. All these indicators are consequences of a poor psychological nutrition.

To sum up, we can group the signs as follows: 1) Intrapersonal emotional nutrients: comprise self-love, self-esteem and self-concept; 2) Relational emotional nutrients: include love of someone, respect, admiration, personal value; 3) Professional nutrients: include self-motivation, work opportunities and recognition of one's productive capacity; 4) Corporal nutrients: taking care of one's look and diet, and physical activities; to feel beautiful irrespective of aesthetic standards; 5) sexual nutrients: to have an active sexual life.

To illustrate the conceptual application of the premise of the psychological nutrition I present excerpts of two clinical cases supervised by me in the clinical attendance at the Psychology school of the UFPA.

**IN CASE I.** The attendance happened in 2014 for 8 months, completing a total of 15 ludotherapy sessions, more two devolutionary interviews with the person responsible. The patient was Maurício 7 years old, studying to 1. A series of the elementary school of the county public system of teaching; two children<sup>1</sup>: two years old girl, on the part of father, and a 4 years old boy, on the part of mother. He lives at the paternal grandfather's house with an aunt and an uncle responsible for him.

The initial complaint presented by the aunt was the concern with the nephew's behavior that was very quiet and he was evaluated as a stupid boy; he didn't accept the paternal grandfathers' cares and he didn't interact well with other children.

The psychodiagnosis ([Pimentel, 2003](#)) and the interventions were accomplished concomitantly during the first three encounters. Family affairs and self-concept appeared more frequently in the verbalizations of Maurício, from his aunt and in his drawings. In the beginning of the services the boy verbalized that he didn't know how to do anything right and that everything that did was always ugly.

The ludotherapy became possible for him the expression with larger freedom and easiness. Drawings were used, war puppets (Maurício's favorite), puppets, assembling toys (house and city), modeling mass, chalk picture, games as jigsaw puzzles, real-estate bank for children and with letters and syllables of the alphabet, history books and comics, pictures of his family, besides verbal reports, as well as Maurício himself as his responsible—his aunt, mainly, and his stepmother.

<sup>1</sup>All of the names here told were changed to preserve the identity of the mentioned people. The services obeyed the ethical rules practiced in the Practice medicine of Psychology of the Federal University of Pará.

**IN CASE II.** Attended in 2014, a total of 14 interviews. From these 1 was of devolutionary character to evaluate and to end the attendance. Rafael, 9 years of age, 2<sup>nd</sup> series of the elementary school. His family was unstructured when he was three years old and he was abandoned, together with the sister, for his biological mother; he didn't have contact with the father. He was housed by a maternal aunt, who became responsible for them assuming the mother role, she was recognized as the maternal figure by the two children, constituting this way a new family.

The child was described in the selection as disobedient for almost everything that was requested him. The teachers used to send bills to his house talking about his aggressive behavior to the classmates as a reaction to nicknames and the accomplishment of the school activities. The school directed him to the Department of Special Education-Division for Diagnosis and an evaluation that directed him to the clinic-school. The conclusions of the evaluation were not made available to the clinic-school, but, according to the adoptive mother, he was considered normal.

In the psychodiagnosis and in the ludotherapy the drawing was used as resource of visualization of the patient's interior universe. The boy showed as lonely boy, living in a world with little color. In a second moment he was confronted, therapeutically and he demonstrated new features of his world that I considered a reconfiguration and a new sense.

The boy interrupted the contact when he felt without supports. The interventions were proposed, trying to making him to live what he was feared by him. He sometimes continued to refuse the experience; in other quietly he seemed to live them. A behavioral effect of the ludic existence and clinical practice was: according the responsible of the boy a decrease of the negative behavior (aggressiveness and disobedience).

**Concluding.** I consider that the children had got to be in contact with their own emotions, feelings and express as much ludic form as verbal. In agreement with the person responsible, they resisted well the psychotherapy. Probably this happened because it was offered to them a space of free expression without prejudices, where they could be authentic, in an integral way and to participate with freedom of the reconstruction of the meanings of their own existences. The respects, the acceptance of their capacities of expressing were other therapeutic facilitator resources of the understanding and solution of their own difficulties.

Through the drawings and the games, the children brought themes related to their self-concept, to the family relationships, these particularly creators of a larger anxiety and much more difficult of being expressed, even with ludic procedures. I consider that the interruptions of the contacts were created when they lost their internal and external supports. In agreement with the reports of the responsible for both cases it was positive and visible the effect of the clinical experience, for instance, the decrease of the negative behavior (aggressiveness and disobedience). We considered the ludotherapy is an instrument in service of the psychological nutrition and overcoming of the emotional hunger.

## 6. Conclusion

Primary prevention is a strategy to fight food disorders. In regard to Anorexia and Bulimia, the pathologies associated with development, family support is very important to the child and to the adolescent. It is also important to create collective spaces of playful reflection, so that they understand the ways the capitalist culture organizes ideology, corporal models and behavioral rules. The latter include eating rules, dressing rules and self-identification rules.

Eating requires pleasure, joy, and equitable distribution of the foods that integrate the food pyramid. Enjoying what is healthy involves time and devotion and, above all, a lot of care. Dental metabolism and mental metabolism; emotional hunger and psychological nutrition are propositions whose isomorphic character is viable. Psychological and social isomorphism is a construct that currently requires more research anchored in the paradigm of the theory of the complexity, which allows a dialogue between different areas of knowledge.

The concept of psychological nutrition encompasses two dimensions: 1) The process of complete metabolization that allows creative adjustment; 2) Description of emotional hunger as a sick exit for the psychological and social adjustment. Eating without organic hunger, showing needs in emotional, sexual, gesture or verbal fields etc. can lead one to lack of control of one's emotions, of one's diet and to alienation from the world.

We live in a period of great emotional hunger. We believe that these concepts are useful to understand some aspects of the emotional and social development of the child and the adolescent, as well as the interpersonal relationships between children and parents in the many family systems.

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