



THE PARADOXICAL THEORY OF CHANGE

- The paradoxical theory of change is part of Gestalt therapy, developed by Laura and Friedrich ('Fritz') Perls in the 1940s and 1950s. Feltham and Dryden (1993: 75) define it as 'a distinctive method of counselling and therapy ... which emphasises immediacy, experiencing and personal responsibility'.
- Worsley (2012: 174) writes: 'Gestalt's genius has been to describe human awareness in detail and systematically. This description differs from [Carl] Rogers', but has much in common with person-centred theory.' Both approaches are based on phenomenology.
- The paradoxical theory of change is based on the idea that change happens when a person becomes what they are, not when they try to become what they are not. A client who comes for therapy is constantly moving between what they feel they should be and what they feel they really are. 'Clients are often encouraged to engage in dialogues between one part of themselves and another, the aim being to clarify incomplete understanding and to enable integration' (Feltham and Dryden, 1993: 75).
- Gestalt therapists believe that clients need to fully experience themselves in the moment. This is in keeping with Marcel Proust's saying 'We are *healed* of a *suffering* only by experiencing it to the *full*.'
- Seligman (2006: 234) writes that 'research suggests that it [Gestalt therapy] does have broad application, perhaps even broader than Fritz and Laura Perls originally anticipated'.
- 'Gestalt therapy seems well-suited to a diverse range of clients' (Seligman, 2006: 235). The paradoxical theory of change could be seen as applying to various client situations, for example a bereaved client who does not wish to feel grief and therefore is resisting

this experience; and a client who won't allow themselves to be angry and so is again resisting experiencing this feeling.

References

Feltham C and Dryden W (1993) *Dictionary of Counselling*, Whurr Publishers

Seligman L (2006) *Theories of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Pearson

Worsley R (2012) 'Integrating with Integrity', in Sanders P (2012) *The Tribes of the Person-Centred Nation*, PCCS Books, 161–186