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Paradoxical Intention: reflection on the complexities of application in psychological practice

The report is aimed at describing the complexities of using of paradoxical intention in psychological practice. A nonclinical case of using paradoxical intention with a client suffering from social anxiety within the framework of the University Center for Psychological Counselling is discussed. There are references that Viktor Emanuel Frankl started using paradoxical intention 100 years ago (1925), but in publications he mentioned the paradoxical intention in 1938 [Alfried Längle, 2003], and formally described the method in 1939 [Weeks, L'Abate, 1982]. Although Viktor Emanuel Frankl himself wrote that he began practicing this method in 1929 [Frankl, 1975], the method was first described in 1946 «and in more detail in 1956» [Frankl, 1967] in his book «The doctor and the Soul». In paradoxical intention, the psychologist inspires the client to intend or desire what the client fears. V.E. Frankl said that the goal of paradoxical intention is for the client to «develop a sense of detachment towards his neurosis by laughing at it». So, the paradoxical intention is aimed at the client changing his attitude towards fear, moving away from his expectations to reality and mobilizing his inner potential [Alfried Längle, 2003]. Paradoxical intention is one of the reliable tools used by practical psychologists, especially in the existential approach, and it has proven to be an effective tool for working with obsessive-compulsive and phobic disorders, and in general, with anticipatory anxiety in the context of short-term treatment. V.E. Frankl noted that even lay people can use the technique of paradoxical intention, based on reading books on logotherapy, and gave corresponding examples [Frankl, 1975]. In addition, cases have been described in which individuals suffering from anticipatory anxiety «helped themselves» by using paradoxical intention, often applying it unwittingly. At the same time, the context of professional psychological practice implies the fulfillment of necessary requirements and therefore the use of paradoxical intention can be accompanied by various challenges, especially among novice specialists. The paper discusses the complexities of using paradoxical intention, in particular the differences between paradoxical intention and other paradoxical techniques such as paradoxical intervention, which have been previously described in the literature [Weeks, L'Abate, 1982; DeBord, 1989; Alfried Längle, 1986]. Using a practical case as an example, it is suggested that for the correct application of paradoxical intention in a nonclinical context, it is important to identify the client's greatest fear. In the context of the client's case described, such a fear is the fear of being weak and socially neglected, which will lead to him not achieving the success he desires in his career. Only after discovering the client's strongest fear can the paradoxical intention be applied, corresponding to an attack on the cause of the symptom, as described by A. Längle [Alfried Längle, 1986]. In addition, the need for a context of biographical work is discussed if the fear is persistent, which already goes beyond the limits of short-term treatment. Thus, the paper discusses the challenges that novice professionals may face in applying paradoxical intention in a nonclinical practice context. Also, through phenomenological work with the cause of fear [Alfried Längle, 1986; Alfried Längle, 2003], emphasis is placed on the differences in the application of paradoxical intention in existential psychotherapy and in behavioral therapy, where practitioners work specifically with behavior [Asher, 2002], and not with the cause of fear. In addition, it is discussed that although the paradoxical intention itself does not imply an appeal to a contextual understanding of the causes of problems, as well as clarification of biographical circumstances of the client [Silvia Längle, Klaassen, 2019], at the same time, the given case shows that these aspects can be important for the application of paradoxical intention within the framework of the existential-analytical approach.