

ABSTRACT

This study addresses a topic which has been neglected in psychotherapy research and theory. Noting that existing models and empirical research in this field are based largely on Christian definitions of forgiveness and prescriptive approaches to psychotherapy, this study focuses on psychotherapy clients' subjective experience of forgiving and on the conceptualisations used to communicate that experience. The study employs a qualitative, interpretative phenomenological approach. Semi-structured interviews with five psychotherapy clients were tape-recorded and then transcribed. The following major themes emerged from the data analysis: leaving behind and moving on; getting clear; expanding, opening and surrendering; a paradoxical process of change. Limitations and implications of the findings are discussed; in particular, suggestions are made as to how forgiving might be incorporated into Gestalt psychotherapy theory by reconceptualising it in terms of a wider process of growth expressed in a radical shift in contact boundary style. The study also suggests that the process of forgiving might hold an important key to elucidating the relationship between psychotherapy and spirituality.