

Master of Science
Gestalt Psychotherapy

Narratives about Gestalt-therapeutic
couple therapy:

What makes a couple come to couple therapy
and what helps in couple therapy

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Summary

The purpose of this study was to find out what makes a couple start couple therapy and what helps in Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy. A second purpose of the study was to see if the analysis can be understood on the basis of the theory of Gestalt therapy. This is a qualitative study in which four couple were interviewed in depth. Proceeding from my first issue, my study gives three examples of motives for starting couple therapy. The three are *crisis*, *recurring conflicts* and *personal motives*. It has been shown in this study that a stronger commitment to seeking couple therapy from the start seems to yield greater change for the couple. It is also possible to observe that fear on the part of one of the parties is depicted as a curbing factor in the need to seek couple therapy. Proceeding from my second issue, it can be said in short that what was portrayed as what helped all four couples was *acceptance*, of themselves and of their relationship. The change for the couples came only after acceptance, but it also required presence, openness and co-creation between the persons in the couple and between the therapist and the couple.

Thanks to...

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Introduction

I have a personal curiosity in couple relationships and couple therapy.¹ Much of my adult life and my adolescence have had to do existentially with couple relationships. Surviving after breakups in couple relationships, living without a couple relationship and surviving in couple relationships have been emotionally strong spices in my everyday life. Together with my wife I have also gone to couple therapy for two Gestalt therapists. We went to couple therapy three times, and those few times changed much of my view of myself and my relationship. I sometimes say jokingly that those three times provided material for two more years of individual therapy.

This thesis has taken me nearly three years to complete from the first sketch and idea to the final version which you hold in your hand. I would like to say that the journey has been fun and exciting the entire time. But that would be a lie. I have had as my ambition the entire time to submit something that would not have been done only because it was supposed to be done. No, I wanted it to be a final result that I could be proud of and that, hopefully, would be useful for the Gestalt movement as well. If I had been able to follow my own rhythm of writing and creating I would have shut myself in for three months and finished the whole thing. That is not how it was. Which was due to the fact that it took a long time to find informants. I could not afford to write full time. My wife wanted to see me (which was mutual), and we had a child together. The fact is that we actually got married during this period. During this process I wrote for brief intervals, which meant that I was forced to expand my way of relating to writing and creating.

In the course of training as a Gestalt therapist I discovered that I had a strong passion for theory. What I like about Gestalt therapy's theories is their simplicity, which not only makes the theories easy to understand and apply but also generates a sense of credibility. Now, the simplicity in the theories should not trick one into thinking that they are simple. Rather, I

¹ Couple counselling is sometimes used synonymously with couple therapy. In Swedish, the term couple counselling coincides with the Swedish translation of 'co-counselling'. Therefore I used only the term couple therapy.

think that there is a depth in the theories of Gestalt theory that requires some contemplation to understand. I know from experience that a moment of reflection usually leads to a sense of life in the theories. This thesis is also a tribute to the living theory.

Couple therapy as a phenomenon

Couple therapy exists today in all major and most minor approaches to psychotherapy. To name a few, there are, among others, *Bowen's systems theory couple therapy*, *cognitive behavioural couple therapy*, *object relations couple therapy*, *narrative couple therapy*, *solution focussed couple therapy*, *emotionally focussed couple therapy* (Harway 2005; Gurman & Jacobson 2002). The different therapeutic systems have different theories and methods for working with couple relationships which both differ and in which there are points in common.

Couple therapy is something that is used for the most part by the white heterosexual middle class in the industrialised countries. The research that has been done on couple therapy is based on this group as well (Stabb 2005). Perhaps this is because it is in the white middle class that equality between the sexes has come furthest. It has created a woman who is not economically dependent on her husband to as great a degree. Possibly, this is an explanation for the fact that the need to enter couple therapy has shown up in this group. Couples who belong to this group simply need not be unhappily married now due to financial incentives. But they can now choose between working with their relationship or going their separate ways. There is also interesting research on an equal couple's getting more out of couple therapy (Stabb 2005).

Couple therapy based on Gestalt therapy

Within the framework of Gestalt therapy is an approach to working with couple and family therapy. Kempler (1977) was first in creating a fairly clear approach to couple therapy based on Gestalt therapy in the book *Principles of Gestalt Family Therapy*. There are instances of Gestalt therapy's having been used earlier with couples, as when Perls (1975) works with couples in *Eye Witness to Therapy*. But it is difficult to distinguish here whether Perls has some special way of working in couple therapy or whether he works from the perspective of

individual therapy but with two people simultaneously. Not until *In Search of Good Form* by Zinker (1994), and the anthology *On Intimate Ground* edited by Wheeler and Beckman (1994), is it possible to discern a stringent approach concerning Gestalt therapy with couples and family. In Scandinavia, too, there has been some theoretical development concerning Gestalt therapy with couples. Hostrup has led here with the two books *Prinsessan och grodan* [*The Princess and the Frog*] (1998) and *Tæft, trit og retning* [*Flair, Pace and Direction*] (2004). In the Swedish arena there is a contribution in the anthology *On Intimate Ground* on couple therapy in groups by the Curmans, which has since been reworked in a Swedish version by Mikael Curman (2004). Another Swedish contribution about couple therapy is in the anthology *Gestaltterapi på Svenska* [*Gestalt Therapy in Swedish*] by Carlgren and Övling (1995).

In couple therapy based on Gestalt therapy, one starts by looking at HOW a couple have contact (for more information on ‘**Contact**’ see page 30) with each other (Zinker 1994; Wheeler & Beckman 1994). WHAT the couple say to each other is of secondary importance. It may be that one or both lose interest when the couple are discussing something in the therapy. Sometimes it might be a matter of their interrupting each other without anyone’s being allowed to finish what they have to say. Perhaps one of them flares up and doesn’t want to talk when the other brings up something sensitive. The couple therapist thus observes the couple’s contact and brings the couple’s attention to how they engage when their contact is unhealthy. Sometimes, for a change to come about, it is enough that the couple’s awareness increases. If this is not the case, the Gestalt therapist will suggest experimenting with other ways of having contact with each other. Some examples of experiments might be feeling out what physical distance they want vis-à-vis one another, letting each other finish what they have to say, or having eye contact with each other, depending on what suits the couple and the couple therapist’s observation of the unhealthy contact.

Many Swedish Gestalt therapists conduct couple therapy today. Even so, not much research has been conducted on Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy. Unfortunately, it should be mentioned that not much research has been done on Gestalt therapy at all. I want to provide

feedback to the Swedish Gestalt therapists on what helps in couple therapy and what makes a couple want to come to grips with their relationship. Obviously I also want to fill in a bit of the enormous void that exists in the scientific community concerning Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy. I hope that the Swedish Gestalt therapists who are interested in conducting couple therapy or are already practicing couple therapy will be able to increase the acuity of their work by means of this study.

Outline of the thesis

In the issues and purpose I take up what the thesis intends to examine. I next talk about what delimitations have been made in the study. After this I take up current research that has to do with the issues. In the section on method I go into what analysis model I have made use of. Following that, I go through the ethical considerations I have made under the heading of ethics. I then go through interesting theory that has to do with the issues. After this my analysis of my empirical material can be read under the analysis section. Using the theory, I draw conclusions in the sub-conclusion. Finally I write my concluding discussion on the basis of the sub-conclusion.

Issues and purpose

The idea of this study is to examine the following issues:

1. What makes a couple start couple therapy?
2. What helps in the Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy?

The couples who took part in the study were couples who had a love relationship with each other. All were living in Sweden and had been in couple therapy with one or more Gestalt therapists. The investigation was conducted by means of videotaped in-depth interviews during the autumn of 2006. The interviews were analysed narratively.

A second purpose of the study is to look at whether what emerged in the narrative analysis can be understood on the basis of the theory of Gestalt therapy. This is in order to see if the theory that exists in Gestalt can be used as an explanatory model in understanding the two issues.

Delimitations

In this study I have not chosen to take up the discussion of how a couple is to be defined. This is a conscious choice for the purpose of delimiting the study. This is a discussion in which it is possible to mix gender studies, systems theory, historical development, politics and biological factors. It would have been fun but I would very likely have got sidetracked in details and slipped away from my issues. But even so, I needed some form of definition about what a couple is. Here I chose to make it easy for myself by imagining that a couple is a couple of people who are married, living together, living apart, lovers, remarried, or who have entered into partnership. Full stop!

I have chosen not to look at psychotherapeutic couple therapies other than Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy. Neither from a theoretical perspective nor by interviewing couples with experience of another couple therapy. This was a conscious choice by me since I was not interested in making a comparative study. At the same time, I wanted to give space to deepening the Gestalt therapeutic theory and to really looking at experiences of couple therapy based on Gestalt therapy.

The last delimitation has to do with gender perspective.² This was a non-conscious choice by me and a mistake. I consider this perspective extremely important and it should have been included as one of the issues in the study. But I came to it too late, when the interviews were already done and I had made the transcriptions. Much time has gone into getting the perspective in afterwards, and I have discussed this a good deal with my supervisor. In the end, I chose on the whole to delimit the perspective in the study, although it does surface in the thesis when I consider it relevant and possible.

² Gender (Gothlin 1999) has to do with individual subjective sexual identity, how sexual differences are constructed and expressed, and how sexual differences affect and are used in relationships, institutions, laws, media, politics, etc. Gender varies over time and space, between cultures and societies. Gender is also an analytic tool for elucidating and describing relations between the sexes in various historical contexts, on social, linguistic and individual levels.

Previous research

The research that has been done on couple and family therapy is large and next to impossible to get a grip on. Hence I have chosen to limit the selection of research solely to research on couple and family therapy based on Gestalt therapy. This means that the selection is very small, which is confirmed as well by Devlin and O'Neill (2004).

Pepernow (1996) studied how stepfamilies become functional. She has interviewed over one hundred family members in different stepfamilies in the U.S. As a model for explaining the process of becoming a functioning stepfamily she uses *the cycle of experience*. She has chosen to see the stepfamily as a whole in which the whole stepfamily passes or gets caught in different phases of the cycle of experience. Pepernow goes through phase by phase, and on the basis of the interviews she sees what causes a family to get stuck or not. I have chosen to use the cycle of experience in a similar way to see what a couple's process looks like before the couple therapy (see '*What makes a couple start couple therapy*' page 53). Otherwise, Pepernow's and my study do not have anything in common.

Lindberg (2005) has done a small study of a qualitative nature with four couples. This is a phenomenological study that examines the experience of the quality of contact within a couple, in which one person has a life-threatening illness. The glass wall is a concept that Lindberg uses as a metaphor for the couple's inability to speak about the life-threatening illness of one of them. After this she shows how, by means of Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy, this glass wall is pushed aside and the couple gains the possibility for genuine contact. She explains what happens in the couple therapy (in order for the glass wall to be pushed aside) as the couples' starting to talk with each other about the difficult feelings. But above all that they are in the difficult feelings together. All this is done with the help of the therapist, who in the study is Lindberg herself. Here Lindberg makes a very apt connection to *the paradoxical theory of change*. This is a connection that I use in this thesis as well (see '*The paradoxical theory of change*' page 33, see '*Relationship between the theories that describe change*' page 35 and '*What helps in the couple therapy*' page 57).

Berg (2008) has done a small study with two purposes. The first is to find out what Gestalt therapists experience as successful couple therapy. The second purpose is to increase knowledge about Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy. The study was based on four interviews with Gestalt therapists who were working with couple therapy. The interviews were analysed phenomenologically. The first purpose is highly topical for my study, as it is very similar to my second issue about what helps in couple therapy (see page 9). Here Berg thinks that contact and I–Thou encounters between the couples characterise successful couple therapy. I too have that perspective in this study (see ‘*Contact*’ page 30, see ‘*Martin Buber’s I–THOU relationship*’ page 34, see ‘*Relationship between the theories that describe change*’ page 35 and see ‘*What helps in the couple therapy*’ page 57). Unfortunately, Berg makes no distinction concerning what is contact and what is the I–Thou encounter. The two concepts are blended together. What she provides support for that has to do with the I–Thou encounters could just as well involve contact and vice versa. Berg also provides support for the possibility of looking at the progress of the couples in Gestalt therapy on the basis of the cycle of experience (Berg uses the term contact cycle). Again, I think it is difficult to follow her in the reasoning on what the cycle of experience has to do with successful couple therapy.

Like Lindberg’s and Berg’s masters theses, my thesis provides support for possibility that the paradoxical theory of change, the theory of contact and Martin Buber’s theory of the I–THOU relationship can explain what helps in couple therapy. But both Lindberg and Berg make a fairly superficial statement of reasons for how the theories are able to explain what helps in couple therapy. I endeavour in this study to provide a deeper explanation for the relationship. Furthermore, I take up the question of what makes a couple come to couple therapy, which Lindberg and Berg do not do.

Method

In this section I discuss how I have proceeded in this study. I start by describing what research technique and philosophical considerations I started from in order to choose a method that suited the study. Next I discuss how it went when I made my selection of the informants who were interviewed. After that I discuss how I approached the study's validity, reliability and generalisability. Finally, I go through what my analysis model looks like and what rules of transcription I have for the transcribed interviews.

Choice of a philosophy of science as point of departure

Choosing between a qualitative or quantitative approach in research is based, according to Barbosa da Silva and Wahlberg (1994), on what view one has of reality, the human being, and knowledge. Patel and Davidson (1991) think rather that the issue governs the choice between a qualitative or a quantitative research method. In facing this study I took both outlooks into account in finding the philosophy of science that would be my point of departure.

To begin with I tried starting from Patel and Davidson's view in choosing between a qualitative or quantitative research method. They think that if the research problem deals with understanding and interpreting the human being, one should have a qualitative approach. This suited my issues (see page 9) and, according to Patel and Davidson, I needed a qualitative method for my research.

If I were to start instead from Barbosa da Silva and Wahlberg's (1994) view, I needed to identify my own view of the world, the human being, and knowledge in order to find my approach to the research. I consider that I experience the world and our selves subjectively. In other words, that we are interpreting and meaning-creating beings. At the same time, I consider that we influence one another's subjective worlds. Knowledge, in my opinion, has powerful elements of subjective perceptions. At the same time that it is somewhat culturally and socially bound. This meant that my research would land in the *hermeneutic-*

*phenomenological field*³ with features of the *postmodern field*,⁴ which in turn requires a qualitative method.

Regardless of whether I chose the approach of Patel and Davidson or Barbosa da Silva and Wahlberg, I consider that my research would lend itself best to **a qualitative approach**.

Choice of methodology

Based on the issues (see page 9) and that it is a qualitative research study, I was balancing between a *phenomenological* or a *narrative* methodology. The phenomenological approach seeks the psychological meaning, the life-world, which the individual participant creates from his/her context and experience (Giorgi & Giorgi 2003). In the narrative approach we, as human beings, create stories⁵ about our lives that provide a structure and meaning concerning our identity and our context (Murray 2003). This differs from phenomenological methodology, which seeks to expose our experiences of the reality, where the experience *per se* is considered to provide meaning (Giorgi & Giorgi 2003).

Choice of method

What I wanted was to try to bring out the narratives of the research subjects. Kvale (1997) thinks that with the qualitative interview one uncovers the interviewed person's experience of

³ Hermeneutics was brought out by Wilhelm Dilthey for the purpose of finding a scientific approach to humanistic subject areas (Nordin 1995). The idea is to try to interpret texts, visual arts and music, understanding by that means the thoughts and feelings of the originator (Lübcke 1983). Phenomenology's is a scientific method whose originator was Edmund Husserl. His idea was to skip the age-old philosophical problem of pondering how human consciousness is able to obtain knowledge of the outside world. The surrounding world is set aside in phenomenology and one is interested rather in how one can expose the experience of the knowing of the external world (Nordin 1995).

⁴ Within postmodernism it is thought that no true knowledge exists. Rather, everything is seen on the basis of how reality is portrayed, who does this portrayal of the reality and what motive this person has in presenting the reality in this fashion (Nordin 1995).

⁵ Johansson (2005: 16) explains what a narration is in the following way: 'Storytelling appears to be a universal human activity. It is fundamental to human thinking and creation of knowledge. Through narration we create meaning from our experience. Through narratives we construct and communicate our perception of the world, ourselves and others. We make moral evaluations, formulate judgements and ethical rules. And thus our narratives are keys to cultural as well as personal meaning-worlds.'

the world before one adds the scientific explanation. I thought this suited my issues and I came to choose to work with **the qualitative interview** as the method in my research.

I chose to let the interview be of an unstructured nature. This meant that there was great freedom and a high possibility for spontaneity in the interview. The disadvantage of choosing this type of interview is the low possibility of making generalisations and also a decreased potential for making comparisons between the interviews.

Selection

Four couples altogether have been interviewed. From the beginning I had no idea about how a couple are defined. It should be two people⁶ who were having or had had a relationship with each other. Then, how the relationship actually was, I did not care; it could be couples who were married, living together, living apart, separated, lovers, unmarried, partners, etc.⁷ Nor did I take into account whether the couple was having or had had a heterosexual or homosexual relationship with each other. The important thing was that these two people had gone to couple therapy for [?] Gestalt therapists. For some reason, it was the case that all the couples who took part in the study were still together and living in heterosexual relationships.

Two of the couples had only one therapist during the couple therapy. The other two couples participated in a group focussed on couple relationships which was led by two therapists. First of all, all the therapists practiced Gestalt therapy. This was checked through how they marketed themselves in SAG [Certified Gestalt Therapists of Sweden]. In that way I ensured that the couples had gone to Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy and nothing else.

Because I went via the therapists in my search for informants, I was forced to rely on the therapists' ability and commitment to selling the project. This proved to be a very bumpy road

⁶ It is also possible to think about how couple therapy ought to look with love relationships between more than two individuals, but I do not go into this.

⁷ Perhaps it is strange to put lover and married in the same compartment. Wouldn't the first relationship be more superficial than the second? My response is not necessarily yes; two lovers may experience greater and deeper belonging than a married couple. Obviously it can also be the reverse.

for finding informants. For a while I was close to giving up or in any case broadening the requirements profile and taking couples who had gone to other forms of couple therapy, but this never needed to happen.

Two criteria were placed on the couple in addition to their having gone to Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy. The first was that the couple felt satisfied with the couple therapy. This is because I was interested in what had helped in the couple therapy and not the difference between good and bad couple therapy. The second was that the couple not be in a crisis. Before the interview began I took up the criteria with the couple, so that I could check on whether the pair matched the criteria.

Implementation

Both persons in the couple were interviewed at the same time. In the study I saw the couple as a whole. Only what could be said between them and to me did I see as an expression of what the couple had actually got out of the couple therapy. Thus, I was out after what they together were able to define concerning the two issues (see page 9). A negative consequence of this approach was that differences of opinion which the couple might have had between themselves perhaps never came out. Another phenomenon was that we were two men and one woman in each interview. From a field theory perspective (see '*Field theory*' page 26), this has to have had an effect on the interview even if it is difficult to say how.

The interviews took place in Stockholm and Göteborg in autumn 2006. A contract was written between me and the informants to make clear what applied concerning participation from my side and theirs (the contract is in Appendix 1). All interviews were taped on video both in order to have access to what was said in words but also to be able to register body language, e.g. if one is nodding in agreement while the other is speaking. The video camera, too, had an effect on the field (see page 26). Perhaps the interviews would have been different without it.

The interviews were unstructured and free. In this way I had as an intention to generate an increased trust and to promote contact among all parties and to bring about a positive interaction. Because the interview took place without a structured interview guide and was

still to lead to production of knowledge, I allowed my spontaneous interview questions to revolve around my issues (see page 9).

Validity, reliability and generalisability

Kvale (1997) considers the three concepts of validity, reliability and generalisability to have a different meaning in a qualitative study than in a quantitative study. Here I go through how I approached the three concepts in my study.

On the basis of the interviews I have done in this study, it is not possible to *generalise*, according to the quantitative ideal in which one strives to be able to say ‘It is like this’ or ‘It is with the highest probability like this’. Rather, it becomes possible in this type of research to be able to say ‘This gives an indication that it might perhaps possibly be like this.’

Johansson (2005) thinks that *validity* in a narrative analysis is a matter of testing the reliability of the analysis rather than seeking some form of absolute truth. She sees the following points as important, and I discuss how I have approached them:

- *Persuasive and possible*. Here the quality of the interview is taken into account. Many quotations with several different alternative explanations ought to be used. Quite simply, the reader should have an opportunity to assess the interpretation of the ‘evidence’ for him/herself. In my analysis I have chosen to present as many quotations as possible so that the reader will have the opportunity to be critical towards the material.
- *Agreement*. Does the transcription really agree with what the informants meant? I have allowed all the people I interviewed to read the transcription to have an opportunity to make changes.
- *Insightfulness*. Here the originality and imaginativeness of the presentation are assessed. The idea behind my presentation was that the reader would have the possibility of insight into and understanding of what helps in Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy and what makes a couple start couple therapy. Obviously there was a personal motivation here as well, to get answers to these questions.

- *Context.* What is meant by this is the context in which the material is assessed. In this case I was interested to check against the existing Gestalt therapeutic theories concerning couple therapy.
- *Pragmatic utility.* This involves the utility of the study in society, the scientific world and the Gestalt world. I think that the Gestalt therapists who conduct couple therapy will benefit by the study. This in turn, it is hoped, will contribute to society through more couples' making constructive endings or continuing their relationships in a constructive manner. The study is structured in a simple fashion that makes it easy to use in further research.

In quantitative interview research, *reliability* does not involve how well the method resists the effect of chance, rather that the interviewer is trained in interview technique and that what is said is picked up in a reliable manner (Patel & Davidson 1991). I have used a video camera to pick up what is said in a reliable manner; by this means I have been able to register body language as well. To practice my interview technique, I did two trial interviews before I began the research work.

Kvale (1997) thinks that verification of *validity* and *reliability* are not something one verifies afterwards in a qualitative study. Rather, the researcher is accompanied by the concepts the entire time. During the development of the study I have endeavoured to relate continually to its validity and reliability. This through practicing interview technique (two trial interviews were done). The transcript has been checked by the people interviewed. I have had the support of my supervisor concerning the analysis phase. Concerning theory and conclusions I have tossed about ideas with Gestalt therapy colleagues. Finally, my supervisor has assessed the entirety of the study.

Patel and Davidson (1991) think that the concepts *validity* and *reliability* go together, and in their opinion a high degree of reliability does not necessarily lead to a high degree of validity, but that low reliability never leads to high validity. In this study I consider both the validity and the reliability to be high enough.

Rules of transcription

Narrative analysis is already taking place in the transcription of the interview, in the opinion of Johansson (2005). I have chosen to look first of all at the content of what is said (see '*Analysis model*' page 19).

When I was doing the transcription I experienced that I was drowning in impressions because I had used a video camera. Hence I was forced to find a way to relate to the flooding information. I found support in Kvale's (1997) underscoring that a transcription which is made of an interview is never anything other than an interpretation of the interview, no matter how carefully it is done. Since I had decided to look at the content of what was said, I could choose to have a relatively high level of abstraction in the transcript. This meant that body language that was not directly necessary for understanding the spoken language was taken away. Otherwise I have chosen to keep the spoken language as far as possible and have avoided transforming it into written language.

The fillers of spoken language such as laughter, 'uh', 'like' and throat-clearing have been written out in brackets in the transcript. Some of these fillers have been omitted when they have made the content more difficult to understand. The body language that I have nevertheless chosen to include is also written out in brackets. Silences and pauses are marked by three dots. Silences and fillers have not been treated in the analysis if it has not been something that was constantly repeated. This is because my focus in the narratives has been on the content. To see an example of how I have done the transcripts, see Appendix 2.

Analysis model

I chose to arrange the analysis process as follows (see the graphic below). First I wrote the transcription (see '*Rules of transcription*' page 18) of all narratives. After that I made a narrative analysis of each individual transcribed narrative. On the basis of the narrative analyses (see page 39) I have chosen to do a sub-conclusion (see page 53) in which I discuss the analyses from a holistic perspective with Gestalt therapeutic theory. In the concluding

discussion (see page 63), I raised the level of abstraction concerning the content in the sub-conclusion and showed what results were achieved in the study.

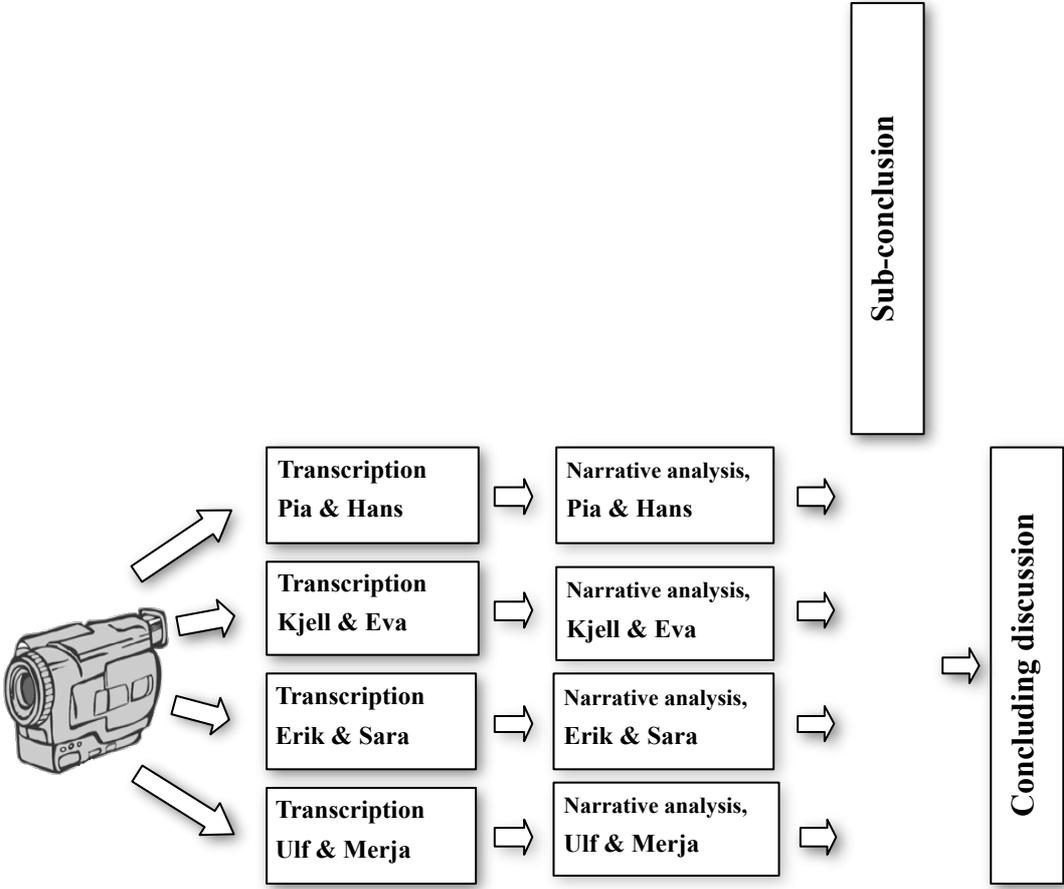


Figure I – The analysis process

The narrative analysis

Three different dimensions can be analysed in a narrative study, according to Johansson (2005):

1. *Form and content in the narrative.* E.g. what characters (roles) there are and what the action looks like.
2. *What means of expression are used.* For example, what rhythm the narrative is narrated in, choice of words, use of metaphor, etc.
3. *The interpersonal dimension.* As examples: who is talking to whom, verbal and non-verbal interaction, who dominates the conversation, etc.

I chose to analyse *on the basis of form and content in the narrative*. I did this given that first of all I did not want to analyse their interaction in the present or how they express themselves. What I wanted was to analyse each couple's narrative as a shared story.

In the narrative analysis I chose above all to use three tools of narrative analysis: *turning point, theme* and *intrigue*.

Turning point

The turning point is the event in the narrative that marks whether or not the goal is within reach (Johansson 2005). It is often a discovery of how things are – an experience of sudden insight. The turning point, in other words, is a decisive event in the narrative.

In my analysis I have looked for whether the couple portrays a turning point as occurring before [instead of *innan*/before: *inom/in?*] the couple therapy. In such cases, I thought, it would be of the quality that it was the decisive factor concerning what was experienced to help in the couple therapy.

I have defined as a turning point only what has been decisive for the couple as a whole. Individual personal turning points for the individual in the couple, which have arisen in couple therapy, I have not indicated as a turning point. This way of working has a problem

since the preferential right of interpretation rests with me in determining afterwards what their shared turning point is.

Themes

Themes are what the narrator tries to convey as the point or points of his/her narrative (Johansson 2005). Thus, a theme answers the question ‘What does that which the narrator is narrating mean?’ A narrator proceeds from ideas and conceptions that explain why things are the way they are when they narrate, which in a narrative analysis are seen as themes. Themes often refer to psychological, social, cultural, political and moral questions. I have chosen to focus on those themes which it is possible to link to my two issues (see page 9), both themes as portrayed by the individual and shared themes for the couple.

The subjective preferential right of interpretation that is implied in choosing how themes will be presented is obviously a problematic power dimension. In order to give the reader an opportunity to evaluate my presentation, I write out the quotations from the interviews that I have chosen in presenting the theme in the manner I have done.

Intrigue

The intrigue represents what happened, the narrative’s structure and how the narrator portrays him/herself and others in the narrative (Johansson 2005). The portrayal of themselves and others is viewed as the characters of the intrigue. The narrative-research team Gergen and Gergen have worked out a division of an intrigue in three different forms that can be combined with each other. The three forms are *progressive*, *stable* and *regressive* (Johansson 2005).

- The *progressive* intrigue leads the action towards the desired goal. In the progressive intrigue the characters portray themselves as going from something difficult, and through various efforts succeeding in getting themselves out of the difficult thing.
- In the *regressive* intrigue the action is led away from the coveted goal. In this intrigue the characters portray everything as getting worse and worse. The characters sustain heavy losses that affect themselves, which leads to bitterness and disappointments.

- When it is a *stable* intrigue the action is led neither towards nor from the goal. Here the characters portray themselves as if everything is chugging along, they are not affected by the external events and are developing in neither the one direction nor the other.

Here too there is a power dimension in which I am the one who has the last word in what the intrigue looks like. It is I who choose which parts of the narrative will be highlighted. Here I have tried to explain how I think and that the reader on the basis of the quotations that exist can determine if I'm talking through my hat.

Approach to the sub-conclusion [sic]

Here I analyse the narrative analyses from a holistic perspective. On the basis of the different themes, possible turning points, roles and the intrigue, I try to see if it is possible to discern features in common. I also look at the analysis from the theory of Gestalt therapy. There is a problem here because the theory of Gestalt therapy endeavours to be a model of reality. This differs from narrative analysis, what takes into account only how the reality is narrated and portrayed. I have tried to solve this by seeing the theory of Gestalt therapy as another way to clarify the narrative from a new perspective.

In the sub-conclusion [sic] I do not go through how the different Gestalt theories function, but only how I think they can explain my narrative analysis. For a more detailed description of how the theories function, I would like to refer to the section on theory (see page 26).

Approach to the concluding discussion

Proceeding from my sub-conclusion [sic], I look critically at the results that have emerged in my study and from these draw conclusions. In the concluding discussion I also look at how Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy can be developed and how research on the topic might be taken further.

Ethics

It is of the utmost importance that a piece of research be necessary for the society's development but also that the individual be protected against humiliation and violation (Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk-samhällsvetenskaplig forskning [Principles of research ethics in humanistic social science research] 2002). There has been relatively little research done on Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy. Even so, I think that Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy is a help to many couples. Therefore I consider it a benefit to society that this study be done.

The individuals are protected by having received anonymity in the published material and the transcripts. But also through the fact that they were included in the study only by giving their consent. At the same time, I gave the couple the opportunity to withdraw from the study. They also had the opportunity to read the transcript before the analysis was made.

In the published material I choose also to bring out my own reflexive side in the study. This in order to make clear that it is a study that was done from a subjective and interpretive attitude. I affect the research. Aspects like my being married, a father, an ethnic Swede in Stockholm, a man, newly a Gestalt therapist, middle class, born in the 1970s, have an impact on my study. Exactly how is difficult to determine; as a reader it is worth having this in the back of your mind as you read.

Even my preconceptions and opinions about love and gender obviously influence the study. Like the fact that I believe that beyond sex and sexual orientation we have the same need to be seen, heard and loved as a whole person. That my ideal image of the couple relationship is a relationship that is based on equality. I also believe that there are more similarities between men and women than differences. At the same time, I believe that there are great differences between the sexes with regard to vulnerability and assigned roles. Another preconception I have is that there are great similarities between living in a same-sex relationship as in a two-sex relationship. Here too I think that there are differences with regard to vulnerability

between living in a same-sex relationship and a two-sex. These perspectives are useful for the reader to know in order for you to be able to read the material critically.

Kvale (1997) considers that aspects of this type are important for the *validity* of a quantitative study as well.

Ethics in the different phases of the study

Kvale (1997) divides a qualitative research interview into the following phases: *thematization, planning, the interview situation, transcription, analysis, verification and reporting*. In this study I have followed his progression. I provide an account here of how I have approached the different ethical dilemmas in the different phases.

Thematization

I started out from this study's being needed because very little research has been done on Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy. My hope was also that the couples who were interviewed would experience the whole thing as meaningful.

Planning

The following three ethical dilemmas existed here to take into account (Kvale 1997):

1. *Ensure confidentiality*. I did this by not personally making contact with the people who had been in couple therapy. Instead I contacted Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapists. I asked them to invite couples who had gone to them for couple therapy.
2. *Consent to participate in the research*. The couples who were invited and were interested in taking part in the study contacted me directly.
3. *Consider the consequences for the persons interviewed that may follow from the investigation*. I avoided couples who were in crisis by asking the therapists to invite couples who were satisfied with their couple therapy and had come through any crisis.

The interview situation

We went through with the informants how confidentiality would be protected, what possibility the interviewed couple had of having an effect and how they could withdraw from the study.

In this regard, a contract was signed between me and the informants (see Appendix 1). All this obviously took place before the interview began and the video camera was turned on.

Transcription and analysis

The interviewed persons have been able to study the transcripts. I also provided the opportunity to discuss the transcription via email or telephone. The informants had the right to make changes.

Verification

Validity and reliability are ethically important parts of the research. Kvale (1997: 105) writes as follows on the ethics of validity and reliability: 'It is the researcher's ethical responsibility as far as possible to verify the knowledge he conveys in his reports.' For more information on how I approach this, see the section '*Validity, reliability and generalisability*' on page 16).

Reporting

I have seen to it that nothing which might disclose the identity of the informants is included in the published material.

Theory

I have chosen to proceed only from Gestalt psychotherapeutic theory. This is because I intended to look at Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy and no other couple therapy. During the process of the study I saw a need to deepen the theories so that they would suit my study. That need made me even more convinced that I should keep only to Gestalt psychotherapeutic theory. As I wrote the theory I was driven by the vision of bringing together a whole and not merely to present fragmentary theoretical ideas. To get the wholeness, I chose to use *field theory* as a meta-theory⁸ in the theory.

The theory I present here are the theories which are chosen because they are relevant in relation to the issues (except for field theory, which fills the function of being a unifying theory). The theories relating to the issues are divided into two sections further down, see ‘*Theories concerning what makes a couple start couple therapy*’ (see page 28) and ‘*Theories relating to what helps in couple therapy*’ (see page 32).

In order to see how the theories are used in relation to the analysis, I refer you as the reader to the sub-conclusion (page 53) and concluding discussion (page 63).

Field theory

Kurt Lewin was the originator of field theory.⁹ He was a social psychologist and researcher. Field theory is a social psychological theory of human interaction and human behaviour.

⁸ Hostrup (1999) portrays existentialism as a meta-theory for the theory of Gestalt therapy. I think that she is wrong. Instead I see existentialism as a basic philosophical outlook in Gestalt therapy. Hierarchically I see the levels (1) basic philosophical outlook, (2) meta-theory, (3) theory, (4) therapeutic method and (5) therapeutic techniques. Unfortunately, this study is not the right place to go deeply into this line of reasoning.

⁹ It is uncertain how much knowledge Fritz Perls had about Lewin’s field theory. Wheeler (1991) argues that Perls had gaps in his knowledge of field theory, but Yontef (1992) maintains that Perls had deep knowledge in the subject. Since Wheeler and Yontef’s debate, Lewin’s field theory has gained a powerful and clear influence in Gestalt theory’s view of human interaction with the surrounding world.

We are all in a field – I find myself in a network of relationships. Maybe I have relationships with my colleagues at work, friends, love partner, children, etc. This is my field. In turn, my colleagues, friends, children and my partner have relationships to others in the network. They in turn have relationships of their own which form their field. In Gestalt therapy the human being is regarded from a field perspective, in other words, how the individual relates to his/her surroundings (Yontef 1993).

My behaviour has its origin in me AND my field – The behaviour that I exhibit has its origin not only in myself, but the behaviour is also influenced from the field in which I find myself (Lewin 1940a). In other words, it is not possible to say that my behaviour only has to do with my surroundings, but nor is it possible to claim that my behaviour only has to do with me. From a Gestalt therapeutic perspective I am responsible for those parts that spring from me and for how I relate to the relationships and events that come from my field (Yontef 1993). However I act, I affect the field.

It is not possible to go out of a field – It is important to point out that whatever I do, it is not possible to step out of a field (Yontef 1993). Everyone is thus always a part of a field in great as in little things.

If one part of the field is changed it is affected in its entirety – My behaviour has the greatest impact on those people to whom I have a direct relationship. Further and further away in the field, the effect of my behaviour becomes smaller and smaller, but everything is touched. In the field, in other words, everything affects everything else (Yontef 1993).

The field is in constant motion – Everything affects everything in the field, which causes it to be in constant motion (Yontef 1993; Lewin 1994). Because it is in constant motion, it is also in constant change. This means that all other people are in constant change.

Each individual has her/his own experience of the field – I have my own individual experience of the influence to which I am exposed (Yontef 1993; Lewin 1943-44). The same

field would have been experienced differently by another person. My experience is a result of how, to what and from what context I relate to the field. How I experience the field in turn influences my behaviour in various ways, which in turn affects other people's experiences of the field. For the same events in a field there is a unique experience on the part of every individual. It follows from this that with a field theory perspective it is not possible to imagine objective truth in a traditional sense.

Theories concerning what makes a couple start couple therapy

Relating to my first issue of what makes a couple come to couple therapy, it was difficult to find theory in the literature of Gestalt therapy. Here there are no obvious theses. In the literature that exists concerning couple therapy based on Gestalt therapy it is most often not brought up at all or it is written of very briefly. But after having thought for a time about the interviews I had done, I thought that all the couples in some way experience a need for which they hope to receive satisfaction through couple therapy. In that case it was very natural for me to think of *the cycle of experience* as a Gestalt therapeutic theory in looking at a couple's path to couple therapy.

The cycle of experience

In describing the genesis and satisfaction of a need, the cycle of experience¹⁰ is used as a metaphor. The cycle is a powerful tool for looking at how, as a person, one sometimes disrupts the possibility of the need's being satisfied (Zinker 1977). Prolonged disruption of urgent needs leads to ill health. The needs which the cycle of experience represents may be of a fleeting nature, like e.g. hunger. But the cycle can also represent needs that take a longer

¹⁰ The cycle of experience [*upplevelsecykeln*] has many names in English, but the most common is 'Cycle of Experience'. In Swedish the most common term is the energy cycle [*energicykeln*] (introduced by Norberg (1986)), but more recently the term cycle of experience has come to be used, which I have chosen because it agrees with the most common English term.

time to satisfy, such as the need to take a training programme. Below I present my version¹¹ of the cycle of experience.

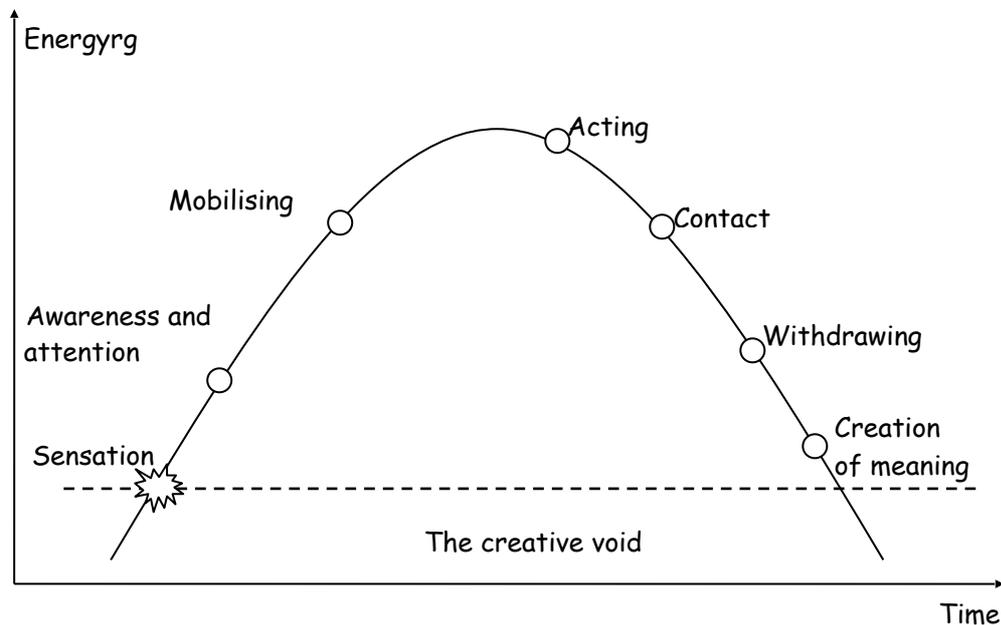


Figure II – The cycle of experience

The *energy* axis stands for physical and psychological tension in the person concerned. The other axis, *time*, represents the time it takes for a need to arise and be concluded in the person concerned. Observe that both axes do not represent measurable values but function as a symbol for the experienced time and the energy stress.

*The creative void*¹² – This can be a purely restful and relaxed state. At the same time, there also exists the possibility of openness and balance in oneself and towards one’s surroundings (field). The reason that it is shown as a dotted line is that it is an attitude to which access

¹¹ Many variations have been presented of what the different stages in the cycle look like. I have proceeded from Zinker’s (1977) approach, but I have added the creative void and creation of meaning. I have received creation of meaning as a phase of its own from a lecture by Seán Gaffeny [sic] during a course week in the Gestalt Academy’s organisational course in 2003.

¹² I chose to add the creative void because I wanted to broaden Perls’s (1947) original idea, in which he had the phase of rest in the cycle. This phase is the opposite to the energy peak of the cycle, which is acting. I want to state that in a Western context the term for the opposite of acting is rest, but in an Eastern context it might be being. This is how I see this phase, as a mixture of rest and being, and this, among other things, is what the creative void involves.

exists in all the other phases, and it can be a state of its own without the other phases. See also more on the creative void on page 35.

Sensation – a need starts to take shape. It may arise in relation to the surroundings or out of oneself (Zinker 1977). It is a feeling of something being about to happen, but the person does not know what.

Awareness and attention – here the individual becomes aware of what sort of need it is by paying attention to her/himself. We may have preconceptions, believe that we are not good enough, have fantasies that no one in the whole world can meet us in our needs, or quite simply not check with ourselves on what we really have as a need. This means that we are sabotaging ourselves in our awareness of what we need.

Mobilising – now the individual makes a mental and physical preparation for doing something about the noticed need. Here the psychological and physical energy stress on the person is greatest. One way of sabotaging this phase is to remain in it, to continue loading and loading for what is going to be done but never firing the shot.

Acting – here the mobilised force has been transformed into action. Now the energy stress in the person decreases. A common problem in this phase is that the mobilising in the previous phase has been skipped over. The consequence of such conduct is that often one does something without having seen the consequences for oneself or one's surroundings.

Contact – now there is a satisfaction either in relation to ourselves, another person or something else in the world around us. Good contact is characterised also by fully accepting that our need cannot always be satisfied. One way of disrupting this phase is not being able to bear the fact that the need cannot be met.

Withdrawing – now there is a leaving of the environment in which the person’s satisfaction of her/his need occurred (or in which the person’s satisfaction did not occur). Not having the possibility to finish generates tension that remains in us.

Creation of meaning – here there is a creating of meaning, a form of reflection on what we have just taken part in. Here, in order to spoil [it] for myself, I can create an unfounded meaning for what I have taken part in. Other ways of getting trapped in this phase are nostalgia or dwelling on what happened.

The cycle of experience in a field perspective

The cycle of experience is also possible to see from a field perspective. Two aspects need to be added in order to adapt the cycle of experience to field theory. First, it is a question of seeing which part of the person’s cycle of experience is obvious to others and which part of the cycle is difficult for other people to see (Wheeler 2003). Second, it is a question of seeing how different people’s cycles of experience interact with each other (Nevis 1987).

The part of the cycle that is apparent to other people is called *the field-self*. The part that is not as visible to other people is called *the body-self*. The body-self is characterised by dreams, desire, fear, past experiences, intentions, etc. The field-self is characterised by support, risks, feelings of shame, belonging and impediment. Hence it is those parts that have to do with one’s relationships to the other people who are involved in regard to one’s need. I consider the part that belongs to the field-self¹³ of the cycle of experience to be acting, contact and withdrawing. The rest of the cycle belongs to the body-self, see figure below. Wheeler is clear that it is not possible to draw a sharp boundary between the interior of the human being and the public part of her need. Thus the body-self and the field-self must serve as metaphors.

¹³ Wheeler (2003) is clear about the fact that boundaries go between mobilising and acting when it is a question of going from the body-self to the field-self. But he does not specify when we emerge from the field-self. I have chosen to place this boundary after withdrawing. This as I consider that withdrawing is a process which has to do with physically and psychologically going from the field-self to the body-self.

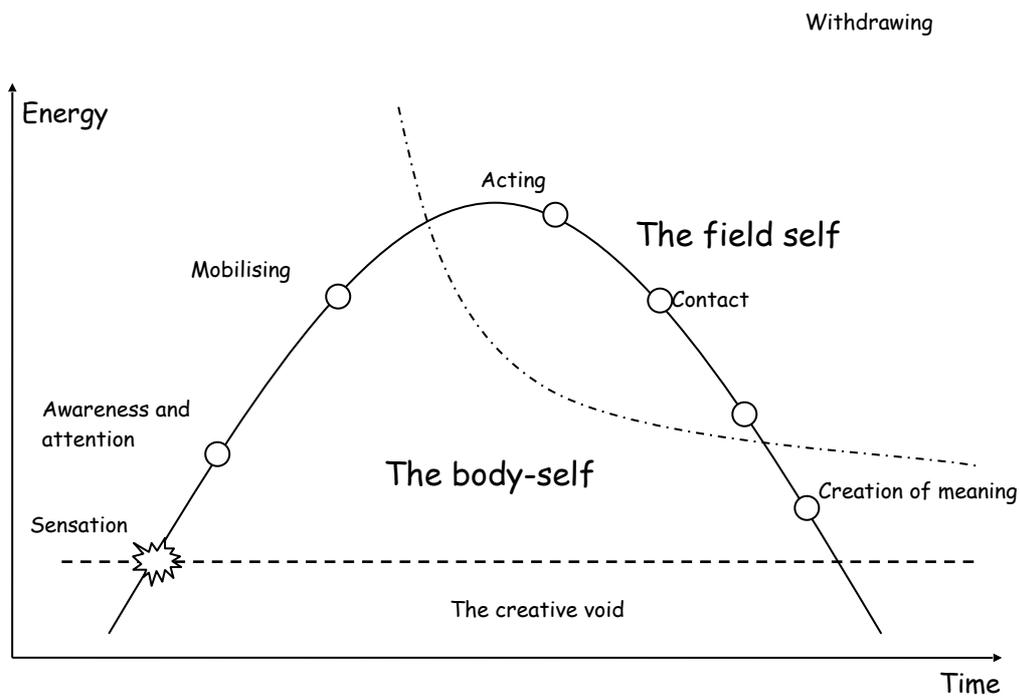


Figure III – The cycle of experience in the field

In order to adapt the cycle of experience to a field perspective, it is necessary to see how two or more people's cycles of experience relate to one another. The figure below shows what it could look like in an ideal situation between two people in e.g. a love relationship. The two people have different rhythms concerning a need, but their cycles have approximately the same peak of quantity of energy. Thus, person one starts earlier and has a longer cycle than person two, but they have the same commitment concerning the need.

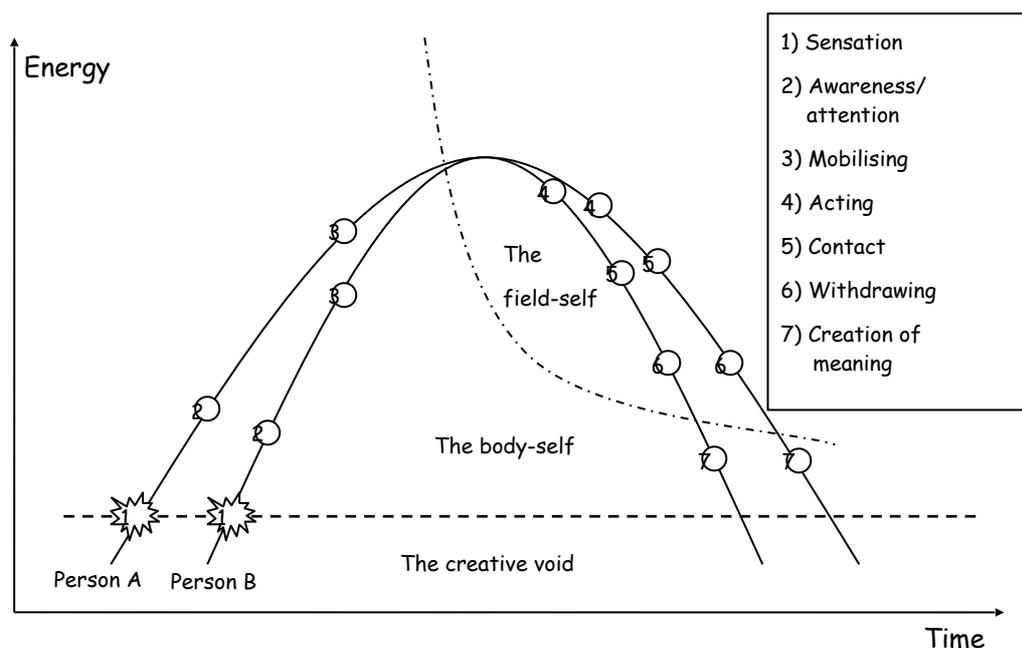


Figure IV – Two cycles of experience in interaction; graphic inspired by Nevis (1987)

Theories relating to what helps in couple therapy

Concerning my second issue relating to what helped a couple in couple therapy, I looked at theories in Gestalt therapy that deal with psychological healing, change and growth. The theories I have been able to find are *contact*, *the paradoxical theory of change*, *Martin Buber's I-THOU relationship* and *the creative void*. But it is fairly difficult to see how they relate to one another. I quickly saw that there would be a gap in my study. Therefore I chose to develop the theories further so that they function together, among other things by bringing field theory in as a meta-theory. For gaining an understanding of how the theories are used in my study, I would refer you to '*What helps in the couple therapy*' (page 57).

The paradoxical theory of change

Beiser (1970) thinks that the view of change in Gestalt therapy is a matter of the person's accepting him/herself as he or she is. Only then is real change possible. Thus, change does not come about by trying, by conviction or by coming to a realisation. Rather it is a matter of abandoning the wish to change, at least for the moment, in order to fully accept oneself completely and fully. In other words, change in an individual cannot be forced, either by the person him/herself or by the environment.

Beiser considers the paradoxical theory of change to be applicable to social systems as well. I consider it to hold also for couples or family systems. Thus it requires an acceptance by the individuals in the system that the system is the way it is, before change is possible.

There is a discrepancy in the view of change between field theory (see page 26) and Beisser's view. Field theory says that everything is always in change. Beisser thinks that change comes about when a person accepts herself as she is. Yontef (2005) is the only one I know who has approached the problem. He thinks that the central issue is not about whether a person is going to change but *how* a person is going to change. When she can accept herself she has the possibility of relating to life in a new way. I consider Yontef's approach to be something of a makeshift solution.

Contact

Contact is an experience of me in relation to that which is not me (Perls, Hefferline & Goodmans [sic] 1951). Thus it is something that includes me and the other or others. In contact, some form of transaction always occurs between a person and that person's environment.

Perls, Hefferline and Goodmans (1951) consider contact to be necessary for change and growth in the human personality. They think it is necessary that the contact be powerful, dynamic and assimilated if it is to lead to change and growth of the person's personality. Not to be powerful, dynamic and assimilated in one's contact, they think, leads to contact interruption.

Wheeler (1991) opposes Perls, Hefferline and Goodman's thoughts that the person who does not have a powerful contact makes an interruption in the contact with her environment. He thinks that a person is always in contact with her surroundings, otherwise she does not survive. This happens more or less consciously, and it is just this that Wheeler thinks makes the difference if contact leads to growth and change in the human personality. He maintains that all contact is always there, which agrees with field theory's thesis that we cannot go

outside the field. Rather, the contact always exists there, more or less consciously, which leads to the contact's being of a more or a less healthy kind for us. The manner in which I have contact, how aware and present I am, and based on what situation (field) I am in, determine whether the contact will lead to change and growth for me.

Martin Buber's I–THOU relationship

According to field theory, we find ourselves constantly in relation to one another. Gestalt therapy has taken inspiration from Martin Buber's dialogue philosophy (Hycner & Jacobs 1995) to describe the quality of a relationship. Buber (1923) considered that as a human being one can relate to the world and one's fellow humans in two ways: the 'I–It' relationship and the 'I–Thou' relationship.

In *the 'I–It' relationship* the surrounding world and ultimately the observer as well are turned into objects. An alienation occurs between the person and the surrounding world.

In *the 'I–Thou' relationship* a subject relationship exists between I and Thou. An acceptance arises between I and Thou. This relationship can take place only in the present. Alienation ceases to exist in the 'I–Thou' relationship, but nor is in a symbiotic relation. One could say rather that *Thou* is present and creates *I*, in the same way that *I* is present and creates *Thou*.

Buber's criticism was not directed at the 'I–It' relationship *per se*, rather he was critical of the fact that there was too great a focus on the 'I–It' relationship in human life, which he considered to be behind much of human suffering (Hycner & Jacobs 1995).

Hycner (Hycner & Jacobs 1995) states that there is a longing in the human being for the 'I–Thou' relationship. He also thinks that a great deal of human suffering would decrease if we were able to establish the 'I–Thou' relationship between people. The 'I–Thou' relationship would thus be an important component in healing the relationship of a couple.

The creative void

The originator of the idea of the mental state of the creative void¹⁴ was the philosopher Salomo Friedlaender.¹⁵ Perls was extremely influenced by Friedlaender's ideas.

When a person enters into the creative void she just *is*. When she is in that state she is alert and open to possibilities. It is thus a state of being balanced and centred. In this state of emptiness the human being has the possibility of focussing her attention in any direction whatever.

Friedlaender (Framback 2003) described the creative void in many ways. He depicted it as the human soul, the person's being, the subjective in being human, the individual in the human being, the identity of the person, the consciousness of the person, the absolute, the infinite, the will of the person, and human freedom. He makes clear that it is a state of consciousness, emptiness and presence that does not yet have form and direction. It is thus a state of openness towards oneself and one's surrounding world. Van Dusen (1958) describes this state as the heart of therapeutic change. A state that people avoid and fear because it contains a feeling of emptiness.

Relationship between the theories that describe change

To begin with, I want to sort out the relationship between Martin Buber's philosophy of '*I-Thou*' relationships, '*I-It*' relationships and the concept of *contact*. Both describe relations between two people or a person and a thing.¹⁶ As I mentioned earlier, Hycner (Hycner & Jacobs 1995) thinks that the 'I-Thou' relationship leads to healing human psychological pain. He brings up that while the 'I-Thou' relationship is always contact, contact need not be an 'I-Thou' relationship. Further, Wheeler (1991) thinks that contact is not interrupted but can be

¹⁴ The creative void is a state that has been given many names in the Gestalt literature and other literature. Here are some examples: 'The creative zero-point', 'Emptiness', 'The fertile void', 'No-mind', and 'Wu wei'. Perls's (1947) variant of the creative void also has strong connections to Eastern religions of emptiness and conscious presence.

¹⁵ Salomo Friedlaender (Perls 1947; Framback 2003) presents his philosophy of the creative void in the book *Creative Indifference* in 1918. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find any copies of the work.

¹⁶ Martin Buber (1923) describes the relationship to God as well, but I do not go deeply into this here.

more or less healthy for us depending on our field, our consciousness and how I have contact. Too great a preponderance of 'I-It' relationships leads to psychological suffering (Buber 1923; Hycner & Jacobs 1995). I see 'I-It' relationships as connected to the type of contact that leads to ill health for us. Here I would prefer to talk about two new¹⁷ concepts, '*I-Thou*' contact and '*I-It*' contact. In this case, 'I-Thou' contact represents the type of contact that *can* lead to healing, growth and change in the person. In the same way, the type of contact that *can* lead to ill health is represented by 'I-It' contact.

In this situation, I put the question to myself, what is it now that makes 'I-Thou' contact able to lead to change, healing and growth by a person or a couple? I looked for the answer by looking at the two other theories of change.

The paradoxical theory of change is based on the thesis that when I accept myself wholly and become myself wholly, this leads to change (Beisser 1970). Note that just acceptance is not enough, it requires a becoming of my whole self as well. Becoming and accepting are a matter of verbs linguistically, of doing something that has a direction. The paradoxical change is a process with a direction towards change, where the paradoxical thing is that I need to abandon the need of a direction towards change in order to accept myself as I am. Here, further questions about the paradoxical theory of change were awakened in me. What makes the paradoxical change process easier to start and complete? What does the paradoxical change process go towards? For the first question I thought that it was clear that if I find myself in a field which accepts me as I am, it is easier for me to be myself and to accept myself as I am. Thus, a field with the existence of relationships of the 'I-Thou' contact type should make it easier for the paradoxical change process to start and be completed.

¹⁷ I thought I was alone with the two concepts '*I-Thou*' contact and '*I-It*' contact until I saw a brief comment about 'I-Thou' contact in a book by Feder (2006: 3). He writes the following: 'Regarding dialogue, throughout the session as leader I encouraged direct dialogue between and among members (some call this "I-Thou" contact).' Unfortunately, Feder does not go more deeply into the concept, nor does he provide any reference to who makes use of connecting 'I-Thou' and contact, or who originated the connecting of the concepts.

The answer to my second question, what the paradoxical change process goes towards, was *the creative void*. My reasoning around this has to do with the fact that when a person has accepted and become herself fully and wholly in this present, she is in a state of just being, in which the integration of the acceptance occurs. To just be is to be in the creative void. When one finds oneself in this state, one can align oneself and, in other words, even one's change in a new direction. Thus it is in the creative void that growth, change and healing of the human personality take place. An 'I-Thou' contact is a precondition for being able to enter the creative void, and the paradoxical process towards change is the way there (see figure below).

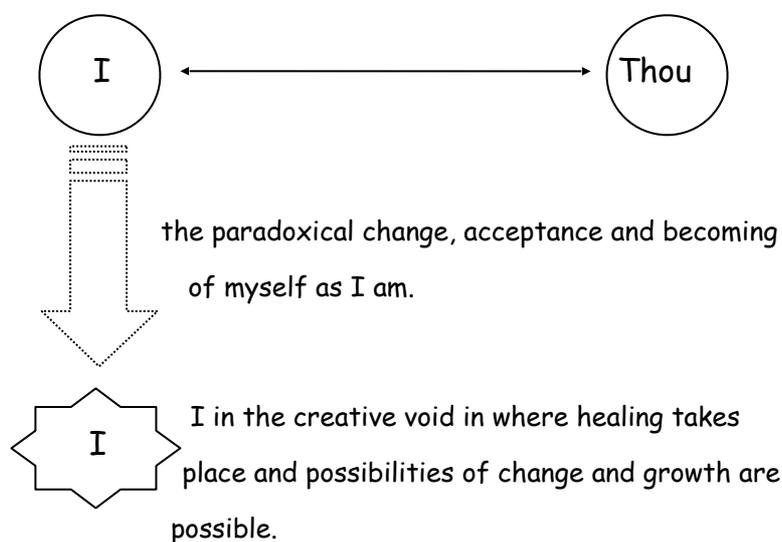
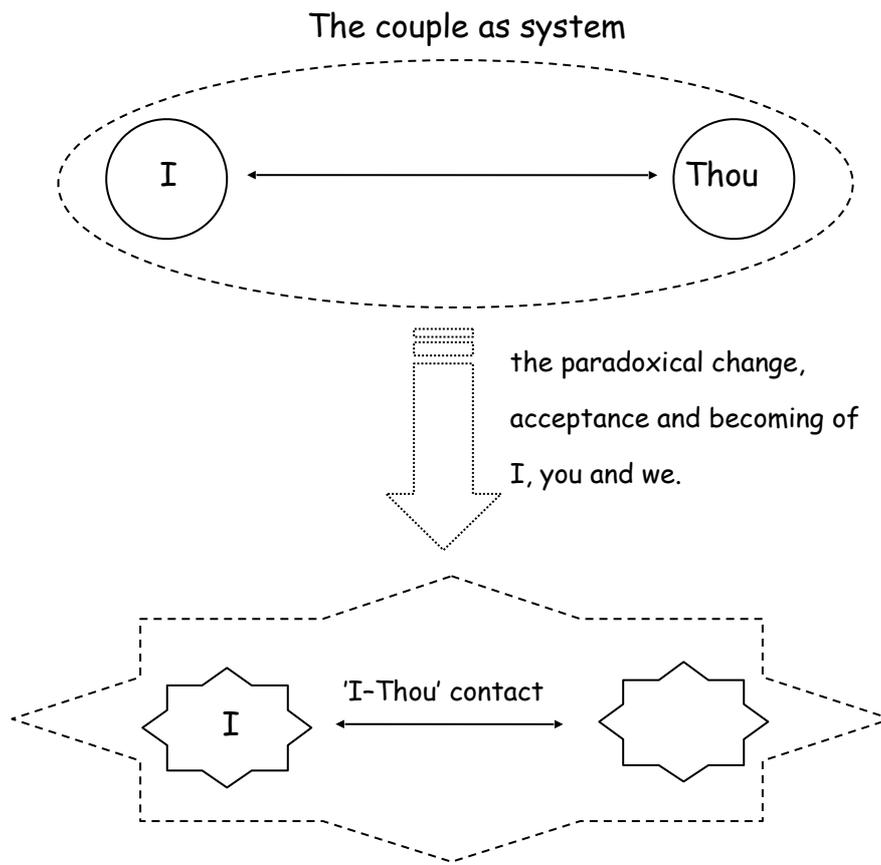


Figure V – growth, change and healing from an individual perspective

The paradoxical theory of change, according to Beisser (1970), is applicable to systems as well. I consider that this ought to mean also that an 'I – Thou' contact within the system, and for the system in relation to other systems, should make it easier to start and complete the paradoxical change process. I also regard it as likely that this means that the system too enters the creative void that makes change, growth and healing possible. If it holds for a system, it ought to work for a couple as well (see figure on next page).



When you, I and we enter into the creative void, the possibility of healing, change and growth exists for the individuals in the couple and for the couple as a whole.

Figure V – growth, change and healing from a couple perspective

Analysis

Here I present my analysis of the four interviews. Each couple are analysed separately. In each analysis I start with a small introduction of my experience of the occasion of the interview. Each analysis has abundant extracts from the interviews. The names are obviously not their own. For more information about the analysis model see page 19.

Pia and Hans

My meeting with Hans and Pia took place in their home. They offered tea and I felt welcome and relaxed. It felt to me as if both of them were curious about the interview and interested in telling about their couple therapy and their shared life. From a field theory perspective (see 'Field theory' page 26), their curiosity affected my relaxedness so that the entire interview had an atmosphere of openness and good will.

HANS: *[...] I felt at the time, that we often got into the same patterns. That you end up in the ditch the same way. Repeated times. [...] It felt that since it was fundamentally so good even so, that it's a pity that we should need to end up there.*

PIA: *It wasn't that I was thinking about whether I should be living with Hans any more. But I also felt that I wasn't able to say Yes all the way, to our relationship. [...] Where I felt that these patterns were in the way.*

Pia and Hans relate that there were patterns in their relationship. The patterns are described by Pia as something that meant she could not say 'yes' all the way to their shared relationship. Hans describes the patterns as disrupting their relationship, which he basically defines as good, repeated times. These patterns are described both as having a destructive impact on their relationship and as something they wanted to get away from. I think that ***the destructive patterns*** are presented as the reason for their wanting to start couple therapy.

PIA: *Yes...I often want to. Or thought that we should change things in the relationship. And that you, that Hans should change in various ways.*

HANS: *[...] That you really wanted development and change of the individual. Or of me, then. And of you, certainly. But there I thought more that: 'Can't a person be allowed to be who you are?'*

Pia and Hans depict two individually different causes of the destructive patterns that [sic]. For Pia the reason is portrayed as her wanting development in the relationship and that Hans should change himself. This can be seen as an individual theme: *development in the relationship and change of the other person in the relationship*. Hans says that his individual cause was that he wanted to be allowed to be who he is. This too can be seen as an individual theme, this time for Hans, which can be formulated as *good enough as he is*. I see Hans's and Pia's individual themes above as causes of the destructive patterns in their relationship.

PIA: *Actually, two three good experiences from therapy [own individual psychotherapy]. And a bad one, too. One really bad. On a psychosynthesis training. [...] heard about people who had been really horrid towards each other [in couple therapy]. Who had said things they hadn't wanted to say. [...] I think I was afraid we'd end up with a bad therapist who would destroy something.*

Although they depict it as their being agreed that they had destructive patterns in their relationship and their wanting to do something about it, they describe it as though the two of them were not equally motivated to seek out couple therapy. Pia recounts that she had a bad experience in individual therapy and that she had heard people who had been horrid to each other in couple therapy. Here I consider that Pia is giving a picture of herself as afraid of going into couple therapy. By being described as *the fearful one*, Pia is defined in the couple's narrative as the brake on their coming to grips with the destructive patterns.

HANS: *I had good experiences from it. How it was to blend in a professional listener and therapist. [...] heard a lot of people say that they had only good experiences [of couple therapy] even if they had chosen to go separate ways. [...] Or I think I remember this, that you thought it was a bit my thing sort of. That I lit upon a number of times. Wanting us to have couple therapy.*

Hans recounts that he had only good experiences of his individual Gestalt therapy. In addition, he depicts his having heard only good stories from other people's experiences of couple therapy. He reflects that it was he who hit upon that they should go to couple therapy. Thereby he presents himself as *the one who is able to act*.

JENS: *How is it that you still changed? [...]*

PIA: *It wasn't that scary or that big. I felt that now I'm tired of this, too. We're so good at so much, why shouldn't we try if we can become better where our patterns collide?*

Pia says that once she was tired of the destructive patterns, couple therapy was no longer as scary. She described how she shifted character from the fearful one to ***the one who also is able to act***.

PIA: *But the most important thing was when she [the couple therapist] asked me, 'But Pia... can you say to Hans that you love him unconditionally exactly as he is now today?'*

HANS: *[...] That is actually my clearest memory from it. When she asks that and you, well what can I say...became clear about it. It was that you actually did love the person I was. It strikes me now, that it was actually that that I was there to hear. [...] And then I can imagine developing and changing.*

PIA: *I think that the most liberating thing was from being stuck, I mean the sense of powerlessness. [...] To bring home that it's the feeling of having power in the situation. Of being able to do something, I can do something. I'm no victim of this bad pattern.*

The **turning point** in the narrative takes place in the episode where they describe how the couple therapist asks Pia if she can ***say that she loves Hans as he is***. That is the point in the narrative that they describe as what causes them to move forward. They portray themselves as taking control over the bad patterns. Although Pia is the most clear, I consider that both of them describe how they went from ***being victims*** of the destructive patterns ***to those who have power*** over these.

PIA: *[...] The interpretive help, I think that she [the couple therapist] could hear what I was saying. And help out in translating it. So that it became clear. [...] That I love you unconditionally and I want us to change and grow together. [...] It's important that I feel in my body, intellectually and emotionally that it is a wise person [therapist] I've ended up with. And with the wise person I open up my own wisdom and feel free and trusting to find my truth. [...] It really is a space that I'm a co-creator in.*

HANS: [...] Finally there was some other person who has a, what shall I call it, objective or completely neutral professional ear here in the room who's hearing us talk. Who is able to hear what we're saying, hear it freely, reflecting it towards one another, catching if there's something here in the room that isn't really pure or genuine.

Pia and Hans portray the therapist's approach as making it possible to break the destructive patterns. They recount differently regarding what the therapist's approach meant, but they both emphasise that **the approach was important**. Pia first describes the couple therapist as an interpretive help in reaching Hans and a catalyst for her own truth. Hans portrays the therapist as a neutral professional listener who was able to guide Pia and Hans in the right direction.

PIA: [...] when I was a child I experienced sexual abuse. Because I have known for so long, I didn't think it had affected me very much. But I also projected it out into my relationship. [...] We talked about your having looked at porn magazines. Which Hans had the confidence to tell me. But it was too charged for me. So, it was really long ago. But it remained. [...] A man who does that is a perpetrator. I couldn't disengage in that way. [...] At the same time, I could see that Hans is no perpetrator. He tells me this honestly and it's no monstrous act. [...] I am a grown woman and I can't lay this out in our relationship. Because this is not a man who wants to abuse me. [...] It was the beginning of more [individual] therapy.

Here Pia recounts something which I see as a *theme* that I call **abusive male sexuality**. Pia talks about her having been exposed to abuse as a child. She describes her having **ascribed to Hans the role of perpetrator**. At the same time, she says that she saw that he was not a perpetrator. With the couple therapy, Pia was able to start working with the image of Hans as perpetrator, a piece of work that she says she carried on with in her own individual therapy.

HANS: Because if you're talking about a couple, then it's so very much the question of sexual identity and sex roles in a couple relationship. So that it would feel more balanced in some way, I think, if it were both a man and a woman who were therapists. [...] Is he taking my side now because he's a man or is she taking Pia's side because she's a woman? [...] It's not based on her not succeeding with it that I'd want to do it differently now. It's more that I'd like to eliminate that question mark from the outset.

Hans relates that *the sex of the therapist constituted a charge* for him. Would she take Pia's side because she was a woman? In the same way, he reasons, that a male therapist purely theoretically might take his own side. Hans maintains that the therapist did not take anyone's side. But he says that it would be nice to have a therapist of each sex to eliminate that question mark from the outset.

I think **the intrigue** in their narrative is *progressive*, since Hans and Pia were going towards their goal of coming out of the constructive [sic] patterns, at the same that they describe how they were developing as people. In the beginning they were caught in their destructive patterns, which they wanted to get themselves out of but they did not know how. The intrigue to couple therapy is not straight as an arrow. Here Hans portrays himself as the one who pushed and Pia as the one who applied the brakes because she was afraid of couple therapy. Pia depicts her getting over her fear of couple therapy. They recounted that in couple therapy they succeeded in mastering their destructive patterns, they were no longer victims of the patterns. This was the start of a more constructive relationship.

Kjell and Eva

I meet Kjell and Eva in my therapy office. They had gone to couple therapy in a group with other couples. It had been difficult to get hold of couples who want to participate and I am nervous facing the interview, which is my second real interview. I experience that they are a bit cautious and reserved towards me. This affects me, and during the whole interview I feel rather stiff. From a field theory outlook (see '*Field theory*' page 26) this may have had an effect such that the openness in the interview decreased.

KJELL: Now we're together for the most part, round the clock, in short [since Eva started working in Kjell's firm]. And this [going to couple therapy] was good, then [...]

JENS: So there was never any real crisis or such.

EVA: No.

KJELL: No, we were trying to prevent something. [...]

EVA: No crisis, no. But a way of trying to see...if we had something that might cause a crisis.

Kjell and Eva portray their wanting to prevent a crisis through couple therapy. Eva was going to start working in Kjell's firm. They would then be seeing each other 24 hours a day. Here Kjell and Eva say that they needed to find out if there could be conflicts due to the fact that they would be both working and living together. From a field theory reflexive perspective it is interesting to see that it is I who introduces the word crisis during the interview. Perhaps they themselves might never have used the word or even thought along that line. One could say that we co-created '**prevent crisis**' as their reason for seeking couple therapy.

EVA: *[...] It was the experience of my sister's total engagement in this, above all the first years of her training [as a Gestalt therapist]. Which made me be sceptical. Because she almost set about therapising the relatives and the family. It got to be too much. Too intrusive in some way. That's why I was so sceptical. Is this going to be that intrusive. So I had to feel that I had to guard myself. This feeling I don't like. [...] Not if you're going to go on a thing like this. Then you have to be able to be open. Not need to think about having to protect yourself. [...] Then you quickly learn that they [the therapists] are supportive. [...] they had a lot of control of the situation. They could steer precisely so that it didn't go off somewhere. Where it concerned comments or...digressions.*

Eva portrays herself as sceptical about embarking on it. She says that she was afraid of not being able to open up and of needing to protect herself. She depicts herself here as **the fearful one** regarding couple therapy. Eva also presents it as important that the therapists were supportive and had control so that the group did not go off.

KJELL: *[...] And then sometimes I felt that if there were a confrontation between us, then I felt a bit sorry for her and in that case I wouldn't dare fall to. [...] Like I said before, my suspicion that Eva had something in her luggage which made me have difficulty falling to. That definitely disappeared.*

EVA: *[...] It wasn't enough that I said that's not how it was. You still didn't believe it.*

KJELL: *Not before I became incredibly strongly assured of it. [...] And just in this group where they led Eva to showing this to me. It was an incredibly powerful experience.*

Kjell portrays himself as motivated towards couple therapy because he felt that he showed exaggerated consideration for Eva when they were in a conflict with each other. This was because he felt sorry for her. Here he says that he is getting help in letting go of his fantasies

that Eva would be exceptionally vulnerable. He describes this as liberating, like letting go of a heavy burden. I see the *exaggerated consideration* as an individual motive for Kjell's going to couple therapy.

EVA: *They divided us up into a male and a female group also. We talked about some things. That none of us had wanted to talk about together.*

JENS: *Did you experience it in the same way?*

KJELL: *Yes, perfect...it felt right?*

EVA: *I think you get another understanding of your partner. Because you've got others of the same sex who think in a similar way or feel in a similar way. In the face of certain situations that maybe you had thought, before, that only your partner had done. There are certain general similarities.*

KJELL: *[...] But here you recognise male and female. It doesn't feel hostile*

They recount that they worked with sex by dividing the group into a men's and a women's group. Kjell and Eve portray the work with gender as very rewarding and something that has helped them. As I see it, they portray the division into groups by sex as safe and they depict a recognition with others of the same sex. Thus there was *creation of safety with classic gender identity*.

JENS: *So there was something here in being able to go in depth with other people.*

EVA: *(mmm)*

KJELL: *Oh yes, it was a bigger experience than our own. Which was quite sober. [...]*

EVA: *Then when you saw that other people were having those aha experiences. When they after three, four days. It's another person. When you can take part in that transformation. It's quite fantastic.*

KJELL: *Totally fantastic. [...]*

EVA: *In fact a small part of the benefit was also to see this that we're actually doing damn well together when you looked at other couples.*

JENS: *So you started appreciating more what you had?*

EVA: *That's completely right. It's strange, isn't it, that you need to take that detour. We were there and participated and in fact actually helped out. Helping them. It was a really good thing, I think.*

The turning point in their narrative is the portrayal of themselves as *participating observers* in the group. They recount that they were able to take part and see other couples' difficulties and how they could help the couples in different ways. They depict this as meaningful: to be able to help others and see a depth in other people. But that through that they also discovered how well they were doing in their own relationship. Here it is seen very clearly how in the interview I want to get them to have been something other than participating observers in the group. At the beginning of the dialogue I have a belief that they will tell me that they opened up themselves, since the others in the group opened up. But it is not until I analyse the transcript in its entirety that I understand that what they actually present as having helped is that they were participating observers.

EVA: *So it hasn't meant any big dramatic changes of direction in our life.*

KJELL: *[...] But I don't think that anything happened, actually, other than that we cleared up a couple of things. We did that relatively quickly, I think (turns quickly towards Eva). After a few days.*

EVA: *If nothing else, we realised that we're doing...*

KJELL: *...really well.*

EVA: *(laughs) well, the crises we have had we've managed pretty well. So we went on still liking to live with each other.*

I think **the intrigue** in Kjell and Eva's narrative is *Stable*. We portray the motive and the goal for couple therapy as preventing a crisis, which they depict their having come to grips with. But this still does not make the intrigue progressive, because the couple therapy has not involved any development of Kjell and Eva either as persons or of their relationship. The couple therapy confirmed that their relationship was good enough and did not need any development. They depict that they were doing well before, they were doing well during the couple therapy, and they were doing well afterwards.

Erik and Sara

The meeting with Sara and Erik feels very relaxed at the beginning. I soon discover that Sara is the person who talks most and that Erik has fairly long periods of silence in the interview. This causes me to feel more and more tense. Sara mentions sometime during the interview that it is usually she who talks most on other occasions as well. At the end of the interview Erik brings up that it had been difficult having a male therapist (see below among the quotations). From a field theory perspective (see '*Field theory*' page 26), perhaps it has an effect on Erik that I am a man, which may be one explanation for his long silences.

ERIK: *It was that we were getting so terribly tired that we felt we were forced to do something. They became such deadlocked situations in some way. We needed help to move forward, quite simply.*

SARA: *Get this whole ballet together and put together a family. Then we were in this whole process of trying to have children. We were so tired in the end that our strength ran out. And then it was nothing but arguments.*

They describe their shared life situation before couple therapy as wearing. Together they were trying to get a stepfamily together, working, and trying to have a child together. All this, taken together, led to recurring, draining arguments. The motive they present as the reason for their deciding to go to couple therapy was that they were often ending up in **recurring conflicts**.

SARA: *We went through a really tough investigation in the municipality. With this thing with adoption. [...] I said, 'I simply can't until we're done with this.' [...] I had promised Erik that after that we'll go there [to couple therapy]. I was even worried that they'd find out and wouldn't approve us on those grounds. You don't really know how they might react to that.*

Sara and Erik were in the middle of an adoption process. Sara says that she felt she could not manage to begin one more process. In addition, she says she was afraid that the evaluation about their suitability to adopt would be negatively affected if they were to learn that Erik and Sara were going to couple therapy. Sara portrays herself as the one who was ***afraid to begin couple therapy***; at the same time she also depicts Erik as the one who was ***pushing to begin couple therapy***.

SARA: *Well, it's about daring to open up, actually. Daring to show someone else your weaknesses and your dark side. Having the strength and the stamina to come to grips with it.*

ERIK: *Well yes, but it's surely also that you realise you've got something to lose by not going there.*

Daring to show who one is, even one's vulnerable sides, Sara presents as a helping factor in couple therapy. I consider here that Sara describes the willingness to ***open up*** as what was helping in couple therapy. Erik also thinks that one has something to lose by not going to it. As I see it, Erik describes a reason that is helping for couple therapy, namely that one is ***motivated towards couple therapy***.

ERIK: *For me it's like this, that we get in a third party who can mediate a bit in the conflicts. [...] Who helps us when there are deadlocked positions. It's probably this that I think is important.*

SARA: *[...] first it was to get communication that worked at all.*

ERIK: *[...] But she'll often say this too: 'Wait a bit, did you hear what Sara said now?' and the underscoring of what's important for the other one really to hear. Because we've also talked about the fact that we often talk about each other.*

SARA: *One interprets.*

The turning point in their narrative comes when they describe that they achieved ***functioning communication***. The couple therapist has ***the character of someone who is able to mediate*** and to guide Erik and Sara out of the conflicts. They say that they got help in really listening to each other, which they describe as being able to happen through their learning to avoid reaching hasty conclusions about what the other was saying.

SARA: *It's both a journey of your own and together with someone else. [...] So I think that that's a further dimension in this. That I wouldn't have if I went myself.*

ERIK: *Nah it's true*

Sara describes couple therapy as a 'journey' in which they worked not only with their relationship but with themselves as well. She gets back-up from Erik that the combination of

working with oneself and with what is shared was important. They portray ***working with oneself and with what is shared*** as a helping factor in couple therapy.

ERIK: *For me it would probably be harder if I sat with another man and tried to get back-up from this man, to set about you. [...] I don't feel that it's you and Mia against me. But on the other hand I probably would have felt that it would have been the male therapist against you. [...] I would probably feel that I would need to be more cautious if it had been a male therapist.*

That it was a female therapist, Erik says, was a security for him. He felt that in this way it did not need to be two men against one woman. He thinks that if it had been two men, he would have been more cautious. What I think Erik is describing is that he ascribes to ***the therapist the role of being harmless because she was a woman***.

SARA: *Then we're also very satisfied with the person [the couple therapist] we have. [...] yes, which is also an important piece in this. It has a lot to do with good confidence. [...] And that both of us have it.*

ERIK: *(nods) [...] That she succeeded in keeping our confidence, the confidence of us both. Because it's a tightrope she has to walk. It is extremely important that one of us doesn't feel that Mia takes the other one's side. Because then it would be all over. It's a difficult task she has. [...]*

SARA: *Yes, she is very careful.*

They say that in the whole process they have had strong confidence in their couple therapist. They describe this as an important aspect that has made the therapy successful. Erik also says that what has generated the confidence is that the therapist never took sides with either Erik or Sara. I consider the fact that ***the couple therapist never took sides*** depicts a helping factor in couple therapy.

JENS: *The two of you say that these conflicts have come at fewer intervals.*

ERIK: *Yes, they have been. [...]*

SARA: *It's been a long time since we ended up in one of those real [conflicts], it was last Midsummer.*

ERIK: *(laughs)*

SARA: *Yes, that was the last time. And that's a good mark, because otherwise it was damn it! once a month. And it tells on you.*

I think *the intrigue* in their narrative is *progressive*, since they move towards their shared goal and they develop as persons in the narrative. The narrative consists of the fact that from the start they are stuck in their destructive conflicts. Sara presents it as if she put on the brakes at the start and Erik was the driving force for starting couple therapy. Thanks to the couple therapy, they have removed themselves from the destructive conflicts towards their shared goal, a more constructive life together.

Ulf and Merja

I met Ulf and Merja at my home. This was my first real interview and I felt very enthusiastic. I offered tea and homemade bread. From a field theory perspective (see '*Field theory*' page 26), perhaps my enthusiasm affected Ulf and Merja, whom I experienced as very engaged and open in the interview. They had twice gone to group therapy in a group with other couples.

MERJA: *[...] we'd also been getting stuck quite a lot, in all these obligations, baby and such. [...] I was mostly curious, I thought at the time, about Gestalt therapy. [...] I was afraid, thought it was scary, when I saw that I could have Ulf with me it felt a bit safer.*

Merja narrates that she was curious about Gestalt therapy. She describes herself as someone who was not brave enough to go to Gestalt therapy on her own. When she saw the Gestalt therapy course for couples, she saw an opportunity to have Ulf with her and in that way was spared going alone. I think that Merja describes a motive of her own – *curiosity about Gestalt therapy* – for going to Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy.

ULF: *If I remember correctly I was fairly depressed at the time. Or depressed I don't know. Most things were shit. [...] I don't know if it was my life or our relationship. But when Merja came with this idea [...] I was right on it!*

MERJA: *I remember about that on that course. Because I was totally devastated, I was shocked. I had no idea that Ulf was so depressed and desperate. It wasn't until the course.*

Here Ulf portrays himself as having had a totally different reason for going to couple therapy. Ulf describes himself as being depressed and that he was looking for a way out of his heavy feelings. When Merja suggested the Gestalt therapy course for couples he saw it as a chance to get away from his heavy feelings. *The depression* was portrayed as the motive for going to couple therapy. Once they were on the course, Merja says that it was a shock to her that Ulf was depressed. They first communicated there about Ulf's motive in wanting to come along to couple therapy.

ULF: *With the kind of conversations you'd never had. [...] it was the biggest kick in my entire life. Well it can be compared to our son being born and when Merja and I were newly in love. It was one among the biggest things that has ever happened. [...] Well we saw the love again that we'd hidden with all the obligations.*

MERJA: *[...] we found what was when we fell in love with each other. That we were able to see it in any case, in the midst of everything. Yes, what had brought us together, that we saw that through all the obligations.*

The turning point in their narrative exists in the depiction of the first Gestalt therapy course for couples. Ulf and Merja describe that they reached each other in a new way; their *communication became open and deep*. Ulf depicts it as one of the most powerful experiences he has been part of. Merja says that thanks to the open and deep communication, they were able to find their way back to the love between them, which had been obscured by all the obligations in life.

ULF: *[...] when you tell something, they [the therapists] notice straightaway when there's a hard passage and you want to gloss over it. They stop you, they ask you to tell more about it (laughs).*

MERJA: *[...] I couldn't open myself to Ulf because I hadn't opened up to myself. [...] What I experienced as so skilful was that they [the couple therapists] did so little. And they still got you to open yourself so much. They just said a few words, but those words came at the right place.*

Ulf portrays it as the couple therapists' seeing when he tried to avoid something important, which he thinks helped him in the couple therapy. Merja depicts the couple therapists as

saying the right thing on the right occasion, which she thinks helped her in the couple therapy. *The couple therapists' attention and timing* are depicted as a help for Ulf and Maria in the couple therapy. As I see it, Merja also says something else here that made it possible for their communication to be deep and open. She describes her not having opened herself to Ulf or to herself. That she was able to *open up* is described as something that helped her.

ULF: [...] When we'd had joint sections, we'd had our men's and they their women's [the group was divided into two groups on the basis of sex]. So afterwards Merja and I met for coffee. What have you all talked about? This has been so hard, you're never going to understand, this is something only we women can talk about, or something like that. Uh huh, I thought that everything was completely open. But it isn't, is it, really. Then I realised that it's exactly the same for them, they have their own world where they are just women, exactly like ours where we are just men.

MERJA: You do share that gender identity. You're in society, you're divided since day one. Then somewhere you've still got to relate, because they're there and we're here. And when we're just us, we don't need to think about them at all.

They were able to work with gender by dividing into a men's and a women's group. As I see it, Ulf and Merja describe it as **gender identity generating security** in the men's group and the women's group. At the same time, I think I can see that when they described their identifying with their respective gender identity in these gender groups they had more difficulty coming to each other in open and deep communication.

MERJA: I don't really know what happened. But I had some kind of nervous breakdown in the summer of 2002. [...] (puff of breath) how to describe it? Well, I just fell into empty nothingness. [...] I lost my footing completely and I was just waiting for Ulf to say it's over now. [...] I really thought about jumping in front of the train, it hurt so badly. [...] it was a bloody trip that I eventually got myself up from.

ULF: [...] it was bloody hard for me too. Even though it sucked for you. Because I was accused of being unfaithful in principle. Which there was no basis for. I experienced it like there was no one who believed me.

[...]

JENS: So the crisis was over at that time [when they came to the course]?

MERJA: Yes it was.

ULF: Yes.

Merja depicts that she lost 'her footing', she entered an individual crisis which they describe as leading to a shared crisis. This happens a number of years after the first couple therapy in a group. I think that the **shared crisis** is portrayed as a new motive for going to couple therapy

again. They tell that this time they succeeded in sorting out the crisis together before they began the couple therapy in a group.

I think that **the intrigue** in Ulf and Merja's narrative is *progressive with regressive elements*. From the beginning they recount that they were caught in all of life's obligations and that their love was lost. They succeeded via couple therapy in reaching a new, deep and open communication and with that, were able to find their way back to love. The narrative about the years that followed has a regressive element in Merja's crisis, which leads to a tough shared crisis for the couple. They succeed together in getting back to love and breaking the regressive episode. The intrigue is progressive as well, through their developing as persons when Merja found a way to open up and Ulf got himself out of his depression.

Sub-conclusion

Here I draw fundamental conclusions based on my analysis of the interviews. This is done through seeing the narrative analysis of the couples' narratives from a holistic perspective. I have chosen here to blend in Gestalt therapeutic theory as well, in order to see how it can provide a complementary understanding of the narrative analysis. See also '*Approach to the sub-conclusion*' (page 22). The sub-conclusion can be divided into two parts '*What makes a couple start couple therapy*' and '*What helps in the couple therapy*' from my two issues (see page 9).

What makes a couple start couple therapy

On the basis of the couples' narratives, there are several different reasons that make the couple start couple therapy. I have divided the reasons for these four couples into three different motives. I have chosen to call the first motive *crisis*, the second *recurring conflicts* and the third *personal motive*.

- *Crisis* – By crisis I mean that the couple find themselves in an emotionally charged situation that they are not able to handle themselves.
- *Recurring conflict* – This motive has to do with the couple's ending up in quarrels about something or someone. They constantly come back to the conflicts in their shared life. They find no way to resolve these conflicts together.
- *Personal motive* – has to do with one or both having a personal agenda for why they want to go to couple therapy. Personal motives can also be sub-motives of the two other variants of motive.

It can be seen in the table on the next page how the division is distributed in the couples in the study.

Table 1 – Motive for couple therapy

Motive	Couple	Explanation
Crisis	Merja & Ulf	The second time Ulf and Merja go to couple therapy the reason is depicted as Merja's having landed in a personal crisis. The crisis led to a shared crisis for the couple as a whole.
	Kjell & Eva	This couple were not in a crisis. They present it as their wanting to avoid a crisis or prevent a crisis by going to couple therapy.
Recurring conflicts	Erik & Sara	Erik and Sara portray it as their getting into constant conflicts and quarrels. They recount that it took a toll on the relationship and that they chose to go to couple therapy in order to handle the conflicts.
	Hans & Pia	They recount that they ended up in conflict about recurring themes or patterns which they had in their relationship. Hans and Pia relate that this was the reason they chose to seek couple therapy.
Personal motives	Merja & Ulf	Ulf and Merja recount that they had two different personal motives in seeking couple therapy the first time. Merja recounts that she was curious about Gestalt therapy and Ulf recounts that he felt depressed.
	Pia & Hans	Pia relates that she wanted development of their relationship and Hans relates that he wanted to be good enough as he is. They present the personal motives as the driving forces for their shared motive: recurring conflicts.

	Kjell & Eva	Kjell recounts having his own personal motive, which was that he felt he showed exaggerated consideration for Eva.
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I have chosen to use the cycle of experience as a model in order to provide a new perspective on the intrigue of the couples. There is a problem with using the cycle of experience as a model to create a new perspective on the intrigues. The cycle of experience was originally constructed from a biological perspective (Perls 1947), which tries to give an objective picture of how a need arises and is satisfied. Narrative analysis is based on constructed narratives and does not try to study reality objectively (Johansson 2005). What this does when I use the cycle of experience as a model for looking at the intrigues, is that I create a new subjective narrative with its own intrigue based on the couples' different intrigues and the cycle of experience.

I have chosen to see the entire intrigue as a cycle of experience (see '*Cycle of experience*' page 28 and '*The cycle of experience in a field perspective*' page 30). What is meant by the entire intrigue is what the couple describe as the origin of the couple therapy (my focus is here), the couple therapy itself, and after the couple therapy. In this case I see *the body-self* in the cycle of experience as both people, with the shared need of going to couple therapy. The external world or *the field-self* I see in this case as the couple therapists (or couple therapists).

My analysis describes three of the couples' intrigues as progressive and one as stable. I portray the three progressive intrigues as all three couples having had synchronised cycles of experience within the couple (see Figure IV on page 32). The stable intrigue too can be described with the synchronised cycles of experience, since the couple narrate that they were united and in accord. I would sooner say that the difference comes from their not having had as much energy and drive for the couple therapy process (see graphic below). As I see it, this has to do with the fact that from the beginning, their need to work with their relationship was not as strong and that they had no need of change.

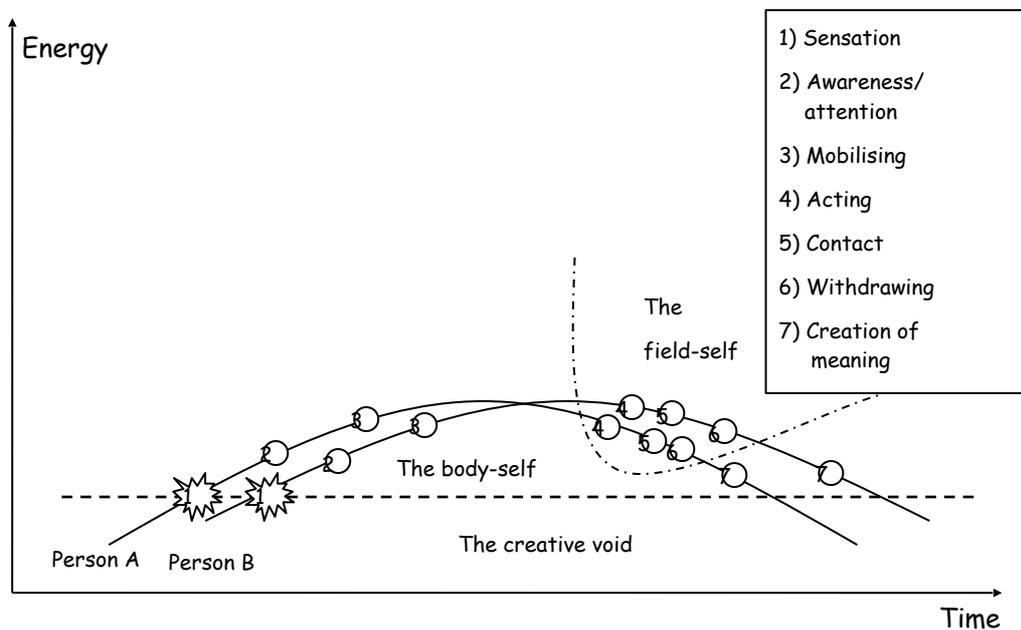


Figure VII – Cycles of experience with low energy; graphic inspired by Nevis (1987)

Below are descriptions of how the intrigues may be seen on the basis of the different phases in the cycle of experiences (see also ‘*The cycle of experience*’ page 28 and ‘*The cycle of experience in a field perspective*’ page 30):

The creative void – this phase is before the intrigue begins. The narratives of the couples do not deal with this phase. Perhaps it is a phase that they have only been in when they were newly in love, with a feeling of openness, balance and several possible shared directions existing in life. Or they have never been in this phase.

Sensation – I see as the start of the intrigue. The start is represented by something that disrupts the couple's life or the interaction between them. The three motives that the couples present are three different examples of sensations a couple relationship can have.

Awareness and attention – are represented by the couple's starting to notice the sensation. In this part of the intrigue there is a communication between the parties in which they determine that they need couple therapy. According to the theory of Gestalt therapy, it is possible to rush through this phase without really checking on what is needed. One example might be personal motives that are not checked on with the other person. It is this that Ulf and Merja portrayed the first time they sought couple therapy, where Merja did not know that Ulf was depressed.

Mobilising – in this part of the intrigue the couple focus their shared energy on looking for a couple therapist. Here, the psychological tension in the couple is great. Internal and external 'events' may show up that further intensify the tension. This may mean that one of them has to wait the other one out before the couple look for the couple therapist. An example of one such event is when someone in the couple is afraid of the couple therapy. This is something which is portrayed in three of the interviews: Pia & Hans, Kjell & Eva and Erik & Sara.

Acting – in this part of the intrigue the couple make contact with the couple therapist. If the couple can be taken by the couple therapist, the tension level sinks. If the other phases before acting have gone very rapidly, the couple may still be poorly synchronised with each other regarding why couple therapy has in fact been sought. An example of this is portrayed in Ulf and Merja's narrative, where it came as a shock to Merja when Ulf said that he felt depressed.

Contact – when the intrigue has come this far, the couple are in couple therapy. Perhaps they have their needs satisfied. It is possible to see a satisfaction as that which helps a couple. This is because the satisfaction of the need means that the motive for beginning the couple therapy disappears. You can read more on what helps in couple therapy on page 57.

Withdrawing – in this part of the intrigue the couple conclude the therapy and begin life without couple therapy. In the interviews I had no focus on this phase.

Creation of meaning – in this part of the intrigue, the portrayal of what the couples have participated in is done. The interview takes place in this phase. Here we co-create the gist of the earlier phases. In other words, we co-create a post-construction of what actually occurred.

What helps in the couple therapy

What is portrayed as helping the couples has points of contact in common with each other. From a Gestalt therapeutic perspective (see also ‘*Theories relating to what helps in couple therapy*’ page 32), the common points of contact can be seen according to the following course of events:

1. Conditions for the couple to be able to establish an ‘*I–Thou*’ contact.
2. They describe that they succeeded in establishing communication between each other, this I see as an ‘*I–Thou*’ contact.
3. The couples portray that a change process occurs, which I see on the basis of *the paradoxical theory of change*.
4. They depict a moment of change, which I see on the basis of the theory of *the creative void*.

Three of the four couples describe the course of events above. It is Kjell and Eva, who have the stable intrigue, who do not follow that course. Starting on the next page I go through every couple’s course of events, in one table for each couple.

Table 2 - Pia & Hans's course of events

Event	Description
<i>Conditions for 'I–Thou' contact</i>	For both Pia and Hans, <i>the therapist's approach</i> is depicted as the factor that caused them to succeed in establishing an 'I–Thou' contact between them. They have different outlooks on what the therapist's approach looked like, but both are agreed that it was the therapist's approach which was decisive. The therapist thus had a beneficial field effect on the couple. For Hans, the sex of the therapist was a factor that slows him in the beginning; he recounts that the power balance of being two women and one man in couple therapy was what made the sex of the therapist charged.
<i>'I–Thou' contact</i>	<i>Pia said to Hans that she loved him exactly the way he was.</i> In that moment is portrayed Hans's becoming a subject for Pia and Pia's becoming a subject for Hans.
<i>The paradoxical change</i>	When <i>Pia said to Hans that she loved him exactly the way he was</i> , they portray their starting to accept one another and seeing themselves as they were.
<i>The creative void</i>	Pia recounts that she was able to live with Hans as he was. At the same time, Hans recounts that thanks to the acceptance, he began to feel that change was not a threat, but something that he wanted. They both describe how they went from <i>being a victim</i> of their problems to <i>having the power to change</i> . In this change, Pia describes her being able to approach an individual difficulty concerning her view of Hans's sexuality as violating or not.

Table 3 – Kjell & Eva’s course of events

Event	Description
<i>Conditions for ‘I–Thou’ contact</i>	Kjell recounts that he got help in letting go of his fantasies that Eva would be exceptionally vulnerable.
<i>‘I–Thou’ contact</i>	On the basis of their narrative, where what helped them is presented as their being participating observers in the group, I think that no ‘I–Thou’ contact occurred. Their portrayal indicates rather that a polarisation took place between the couple and the group. The group became the polarity that had problems and themselves the polarity that did not have problems. Perhaps the whole thing could be defined as their having and ‘I–It’ contact with the group.
<i>The paradoxical change</i>	In their mirroring with the group, Kjell and Eva were able to experience that they were fine as they were. They were able to accept themselves as they were.
<i>The creative void</i>	This couple are exciting because they recount that thanks to the couple therapy in a group they can see what they had [not?] seen before: that they are doing well in their relationship. They portray that an acceptance took place without a change in either themselves or their relationship.

Table 4 – Erik & Sara’s course of events

Event	Description
<i>Conditions for ‘I–Thou’ contact</i>	<p>The fact that the therapist <i>never took sides</i> with either Erik or Sara, they portray as the two factors that helped them. As I see it, the therapist became a support for an ‘I –Thou’ contact to be able to happen between them.</p> <p>For Erik things were also made easier by the fact that <i>the therapist was a woman</i>. This was because he recounts that he feels that he would have not dared to be as direct towards Sara if the therapist had been a man, because the distribution of power between the sexes would have been otherwise for Erik.</p> <p>Erik depicts being motivated in the face of the couple therapy as also being important.</p>
<i>‘I–Thou’ contact</i>	<p>Erik and Sara recount that they succeeded in establishing a <i>functioning communication</i>, even on the themes they had previously ended up in destructive conflicts about. I think that the functioning communication has to do with their having succeeded in establishing an ‘I –Thou’ contact.</p> <p>Instead of ending up in conflicts about right and wrong they were able to bear with one another’s experiences.</p>
<i>The paradoxical change</i>	<p>Once they found a functioning communication, they had the possibility to work with themselves and what was shared in the relationship. Sara describes it as their daring to open themselves up to each other.</p>
<i>The creative void</i>	<p>The functioning communication, the possibility to work with oneself and what is shared are described as different routes to change, away from the destructive conflicts.</p>

Table 5 – Ulf & Merja’s course of events

Event	Description
<i>Conditions for ‘I–Thou’ contact</i>	<i>The therapist’s timing and attention</i> are described as making it possible for them to find a deep and open communication.
<i>‘I–Thou’ contact</i>	Ulf and Merja recount that in couple therapy they gained a <i>deep and open communication</i> between themselves. It is described as a very powerful experience.
<i>The paradoxical change</i>	The ‘I –Thou’ contact is depicted as what led to their seeing the love between them. Ulf portrays it as a way of breaking his depressed feelings. Merja says further that she dared to open up to herself and to Ulf.
<i>The creative void</i>	They depict their meeting each other in a deep and open communication and finding their way back to love.

Concluding discussion

From my first issue ‘*What makes a couple start couple therapy?*’ my study provides three examples of motives for starting couple therapy. The three are *crisis*, *recurring conflicts* and *personal motives*. The sample is obviously too small to give a statistical indication concerning what reasons for couple therapy can be. I think one would find more motives for why couples choose to go to couple therapy if one did more studies with larger samples. It can also be discussed whether it is possible to draw sharp borders between different motives as I have chosen to do. It is fully possible of course for a couple in crisis to have recurring conflicts between themselves and have personal motives for why they want to go to couple therapy. One possible thought is that other motives would have shown themselves as well if I had not had the second issue (see page 9), since it presupposes that the couple are satisfied with the couple therapist.

From the perspective of the first issue, my depiction of the couples’ intrigues on the basis of the cycle of experience is particularly interesting. It gives the picture that a more powerful engagement from the beginning in seeking couple therapy yields a bigger change for the couple. Visually, this is also illustrated clearly when the interaction of two cycles of experience is allowed to illuminate the course of the intrigues (see ‘*Figure IV*’ for Progressive intrigue on page 32 and ‘*Figure VII*’ for Stable intrigue on page 56. Now, it is obviously still too small a base to be able to draw any conclusions that this is in fact the case, and I make no claim to an objective truth. In the intrigues it is also portrayed that one party’s fear was a curbing factor in the need to seek couple therapy, which three of the couples recount.

From my second issue ‘*What helps in the Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy?*’ it is depicted in my study that there is a difference between the couples who had a progressive intrigue and the couple who had a stable intrigue. The differences consist in that the couples with the progressive intrigues portray themselves as having developed their relationship, while the couple with the stable intrigue do not recount that they did this. Now, it is important to point out nevertheless that all of the couples portray themselves as having been helped. What is portrayed as helping by all four couples is acceptance, of themselves and of their relationship.

For there to be also a development of the relationship and the individuals, more is required. The couples with the progressive intrigues depict how they established an 'I-Thou' contact in their relationship, and that with that, gained an opening for a change. This was thanks to the openness and presence that the 'I-Thou' contact provided the condition for, something which we in Gestalt call the creative void. In summary, it can be said that the change for the couples came, wholly in accordance to the theory of paradoxical change, only after the acceptance of themselves and of their relationship, but that it also required an 'I-Thou' contact and a creative voice in order for change to come about.

One area to build on further with additional research is the weak discussion concerning gender and the impact it might have on Gestalt-therapeutic couple therapy. In this study there are a great many loose ends concerning the theme which could be taken deeper. One example is that in three of the couples it is the woman who portrays herself as afraid of beginning the couple therapy. Which differs from the notions of Gestalt therapists that it is the woman who pursues starting couple therapy (Berg 2008). Another area to look at is working with separation of the sexes when one is working with couples. In two cases that appear in this study this proves to generate security and recognition. But at the same time, it does not lead to any development for the couples but rather polarises still more the prevalent limited outlook on men and women. A third area that would be interesting to look at further in additional research is how the sex of a lone couple therapist affects a heterosexual couple. In this study, it affected the person who was alone in his gender identity completely differently; for one it was a support, for the other a hindrance. I think that a good point of departure for such studies might be Kerosuo's (2004) thesis on Gestalt therapy and sex/gender.

My model of the interaction of the four theories in Gestalt therapy that have to do with the couple's growth, change and healing, has been very rewarding in the analysis of what helps in couple therapy. The model's application concerning what helps in couple therapy is perhaps the most important contribution of this study. The fact is that I think the model can be applied as an expanded view on growth, change and healing also at an individual level and in systems larger than couples. It would be interesting here to look in further studies at whether it is

possible to refine the model and whether it really is applicable. It would be interesting, too, to compare the model with models of growth, change and healing in other psychotherapeutic approaches.

Although the writing of this thesis has been a great stress in my life and for my relationship with my wife, there have been moments of pure joy. These moments have had to do with my arriving at insights and gaining understanding and knowledge about the two issues I framed. It has also been really rewarding to develop and deepen the Gestalt therapeutic theories. Even so, best of all, probably, has been doing the interviews. One thing is certain, I will never again undertake to transcribe videotape.

This study has given the Gestalt community a deeper understanding about what causes a couple to seek couple therapy. At the same time, it has also increased the understanding about what helps in Gestalt-therapeutic therapy. The study has also developed and deepened already existing Gestalt therapeutic theories.

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