

RELATIONAL COMPETENCE

IN

COUPLES WORK

ALTERNATIVE B: IN DEPTH DISCUSSION OF THEORY OR PRACTICE.

“DECLARATION:

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the MSc in Gestalt Psychotherapy, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work and list of references.”

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ABSTRACT.

Can I use the concept of relational competence to support me as a Gestalt therapist when working with couples?

In this paper I address a process oriented way of working with couples. I am particularly interested in how each person's life history is playing an important part of the couple's interaction as well as the mutual influence of each person in the relationship, the so called co-creation - of the field. I will explore the notion of relational competence and consider how this concept may be useful in supporting me as a Gestalt therapist when working with couples.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Abstract.....	p. 2
Table of Contents	p. 3
1. <i>Introduction</i>	p. 4
2. Personal Experience and Development of Interest for the Topic....	p. 5 - 6
3. <i>Research Question: Relational Competence</i>	p. 6 - 9
3.1. The Relational Paradigm	p. 9 - 11
3.2. Competence	p. 11- 13
4. <i>Theory: Relational Competence from a Gestalt Perspective</i>	p. 13
4.1. Implications of Theory of Ground Structures	p. 13 - 15
4.2. Perspectives on Theoretical Models Regarding Structured Ground and Competence	p. 15 - 17
4.3. Contribution to Gestalt by the Study of Ground Structure and Relational Competence	p. 17 - 20
5. <i>Discussion: Can I Use the Concept of Relational Competence to Support Me When Working with Couples?</i>	p. 21
5.1. Relational Competence and Relational Awareness	p. 21 - 24
5.2. Process Model: Relational Awareness and Relational Competence....	p. 25 - 28
5.3. <i>Conclusion: Relational Competence and Relational Awareness</i>	p. 28
6. Reflections on the Writing Process and the Wider Field	p. 29
6.1 Ability for Self Support	p. 29 - 31
6.2. Did I Succeed in Doing What I set out to Do?	p. 31 - 32
6.3. The Wider Field	p. 33 - 34
6.4 Looking Further	p. 35
7. Reference List	p. 36 - 38

1. INTRODUCTION.

The Gestalt method of psychotherapy has traditionally drawn on the here- and now, field and phenomenological perspectives as defined by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman in Gestalt Therapy (1951). As a contradiction to the psychoanalytical approach, where neurosis was explained by suppressed feelings from the client's childhood and parental figures, Perls together with his wife Laura Perls and their co-authors founded a new, action-oriented method of therapy which would insist on being fundamentally phenomenological in its approach (Zinker 1977).

The impact of the Gestalt method was that of paying attention to the present figure (ibid). This tradition has been followed to a great extent by later Gestalt practitioners. The consequence has been that of negligence of the importance of history and past experiences of the clients. With Gordon Wheeler's focus on the potential lying in the ground structure (1991), the Gestalt environment gained an approach which, theoretically, supported a combination of the uniqueness of Gestalt models with the past experiences and historical background of clients. The possibilities and challenges of this combination have caused a great deal of discussions and disagreements within the Gestalt environment.

The trend seems that a greater part of the Gestalt practitioners and writers are moving towards acknowledging the importance of working with background, hence taking a step towards a new perspective on working phenomenally (Yontef 1988). We may describe it as operating the Gestalt method under a different paradigm but still in concordance with the theories of Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951).

In this paper, I will explore the concept of relational competence which is developed over a person's life span based on Wheeler's ground structure proposals and consider how this concept can support me as a Gestalt therapist when working with couples.

2. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF INTEREST FOR THE TOPIC.

Having failed twice in establishing permanent relationships where children were involved, I was eager to find out more about the dynamics of relationships before and during my third marriage. Out of personal motivation I have therefore been searching for information regarding relationships and love life.

The first books I read regarding relationships was a self-help book, "*Love Pictures*", by a Danish author, Hostrup (1994). Hostrup is a psychologist and Gestalt Therapist. In "*Love Pictures*" I found her stereotyping relationships, applying Jungian archetypes and polarities to relationships. To me this book simplified the complexity of relationships. Another book I also found stigmatizing by applying different, significant traits to women and men, was the bestseller "*Men are from Mars and Women from Venus*" by John Gray (1993). How come these books are best-sellers? Is it lack of better literature or do people like simple answers to complex situations, which in turn enable them to jump to conclusions?

I then moved on to more philosophical books like "*5 different ways of expressing love*" by Chapman (1992), "*Art of Loving*" by Fromm (1957) and "*Soulmates*" by Moore (1994), neither giving me new insight to what I already knew. Looking for love was not my problem, the challenge was how to make the commitment last.

Over the last decades, there has been an increased focus on issues related to relationships in the Norwegian media (A-Magasinet; Dagbladet). Many newspapers have introduced own columns focusing on everything from communication to sex. I read these with great interest.

I was particularly encouraged reading articles and books by Gran and Thuen, two acknowledged psychologists (Gran 2004/2007; Thuen 2011). In my view, they showed a humanistic and personal approach to couples issues, in contrast to others who tended to hide

behind authoritative, professional stances, research and figures, which alienated me and my relational challenges. I felt discouraged, a failure.

It was not before my husband to be and I, two months into our relationship, had Gestalt couples counseling that my lack of skills and competence became evident to me by how we communicated and dealt with conflicts. What we learned by exploring and experiencing in the Gestalt therapeutic setting, has been of crucial importance to develop a dynamic relationship in which I feel mutual love and respect. The issues I discovered and am still working on, is what I want to put forward and discuss in this paper. A word that has been developing in my mind is that of **relational competence**. This has become a key term as to how I define my own relational development, as a married woman as well as in other relationships. I have therefore been curious about this concept. Is there anything written related to this notion that could support me in exploring my newfound wisdom and how can I use it as a Gestalt therapist?

3. RESEARCH QUESTION: RELATIONAL COMPETENCE.

In psychological literature there are many theories regarding relations, attachments and problem solving. Psychological research pays increased attention to the importance of relations for healthy functioning (Perls et al. 1951, Zinker 1977). We are according to Hendrix, the founder of Imago-Therapy, moving towards a “*relational paradigm which entails and expands the traditional individual paradigm*” (Henrix 2008 p.417).

The terminology of relational competence is not explicitly mentioned in many publications. I have come across two definitions on relational competence. The first is a rather extensive publication by Italian psychiatrists L'Abate, Cusinato and Maino (2010) defining relational competence as:

"The set of traits that allow people to interact with each other effectively and which enjoys a long history of being recorded, studied, and analyzed. Accordingly Relational Competence Theory (RCT) complements theories that treat individuals' personality and functioning individually by placing the individual into full family and social context."

The researchers are putting the individual, with all his or her traits and competence into a social context. This approach would not incorporate well with the Gestalt theories which are field oriented thereby interested in the mutual influence, the co-creation of the field. (Zinker 1994; Wollants 2007).

Another book, "*Relational Competence*" (2005) (my translation) by Norwegian author Spurkeland, primarily dealing with organizational behavior, defines relational competence as:

"That what makes us achieve contact and ability to interact. Everyone seeks solutions which entails capability of communicating and create relations...(…) In a society based on democracy and individualism, authority must yield in favor of dialogue and equal influence"(my translation)(p.62).

Spurkeland captures the essence of Gestalt, how we co-create and mutually influence each other. However, he refers to Relational Competence as "That", without exploring or defining the notion. It might seem obvious and simple "*that what makes us achieve...*" (ibid). I argue, on the other hand, that it is a more complex process than may appear by reading this definition. The definition captures some necessary, basic elements of relational challenges, but cuts short of explaining how relational competence is achieved and what it entails.

My personal experience is that reading about the challenges (content) between me and my partners or being presented with ideological ideas about well-functioning, good balanced relationships from well-educated psychologists and philosophers made me possibly wiser and

educated. It improved my ability to rationalize about the challenges. However, this knowledge did not help me staying married or understanding what the problem really was. I was caught in blaming my partners for being hopeless and making it impossible for me to stay in the relationships.

Being in Gestalt counseling opened my eyes to the actual issues at stake. It was not the ability of communicating verbally, having well rationalized dialogue was not a problem. The **process** of experimenting and experiencing turned out to be a facilitator of my personal insight. The **awareness of being** in the relationship, what was really going on **between us**, how we **interacted and connected** made an impact on the co-created field (Zinker 1977; Wollants 2007) and the insight enabled me to establish a long term relationship after so many years of struggling.

As a Gestalt therapist with personal experience to support my frame of reference, I am engaged in looking at the process between the couple instead of focusing on the content. I strongly believe in learning and growth as an experimental and experiential process in contrast to the rationalization and cognitive approach only, concurring with Hemming “*Gestalt theory emphasizes the concrete over the abstract*” (in Wheeler and Backman 1994,p. 60)

I am increasingly aware of the significance of past experiences, heritage and creative adaptations from earlier attachments as strongly influential in a person’s life. Through individual and couple work, I realize that being abandoned by my mother, growing up with divorced parents and having difficult experiences in my adolescence influence my abilities for satisfactory contact. I have had to learn a different way of involving myself with others and I am aware of my relational challenges. Related to these important experiences and discoveries is this what I want to explore:

1. *How can the notion of relational competence be understood from a Gestalt perspective?*
2. *Can I use the concept of relational competence to support me as a Gestalt therapist in working with couples?*

I define relational competence as:

Relational Competence is a concept of how the sum of your history, background, learning and experience (from the structures of ground) influence you in the here and now and how this is figural in the co-created relationship. It is the capacity of being able to make satisfactory contact. It is the flexibly responding self in a situation of a given field condition, in the in-between of a relation. The competences that support us in relationships.

3.1. The Relational Paradigm.

Gestalt therapy as described by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951) is based on the works of the early Gestalt psychologists, Wertheimer, Köhler, Koffka and Lewin (ibid) from the pre-war Berlin School and the dialogic, I–Thou approach by Buber (1923).

Drawing on the works of Perls, Hefferline and Goodman Yontef has been contributing to the discourse of the field and phenomenology practice in particular. He states:

“The Field is a Unitary Whole: Everything Affects Everything Else” (1988, p. 306)

This seems a simple philosophy of being field and phenomenologically oriented. However, in *“The Relational Attitude in Gestalt Therapy & Practice”* (Jacobs and Hycner 2009) Yontef addresses the complexities of operating this basic philosophical stance and stresses the implications of doing so:

“Gestalt therapy is systematically relational in its underlying theory and methodology. A relational perspective is so central to the theory of Gestalt therapy that without it there is no coherent core of Gestalt therapy theory or practice.....(...) Some common ways of talking about and practicing Gestalt therapy are not fully consistent with the basic relational theory of Gestalt therapy. Moreover, there are relational implications implied in the foundational theory that are not consistently or sufficiently explicated” (p. 37/38)

Attention has to be made to the relational paradigm.

“Gestalt therapists are interested in relational actualisation” (Hycner in Wollants 2007, p.114).

Wollants refers to the early Gestalt Psychologists, Wertheimer, Köhler, Koffka and Goldstein by stating:

“Self-actualising is the realising of the best of interaction of a person and his environment of which they are capable, given the conditions, restrictions and possibilities of the whole situation at a certain point in time” (Wollants 2007, p. 115)

and he quotes Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (PHG):

“PHG locate the interactional dynamics, in the first instance, not in the person, nor in the environment, but in the situation they form together” (Wollants 2007, p. 133)

Together these three statements illustrate different aspects of relational co-creation. Like Yontef Wollants focuses on the implications of the relational aspect in the therapeutic setting, what Wollants calls *“Therapy of the situation”* (ibid). Over and over he repeats, in various settings and discussions, the situation as a whole and not the individual in a system. There is a therapeutic challenge in the shift of focus when operating a relational paradigm.

My personal experience is that **the grasping of the function of the co-created field, the mutual influence and the interlocking pattern, resulted in a leap of awareness, improved my “relational competence”, which altered my capacities to sustain a long-term relationship.**

By addressing the importance of the relational perspective I turn to the competence aspect of the relational competence notion:

3.2. Competence.

I believe there is a choice by using the word competence in favor of skill or capacity that calls for some explanation:

Skill is defined as “1) the ability to utilize one’s knowledge effectively and readily 2) a developed aptitude or ability in a particular field” (Penguin Dictionary 1986, p. 875) whereas *skilled* is defined as “1) having a mastery of or proficiency in sthg (eg a technique or trade)” (ibid). In my opinion “skills” in this matter refers to a more fixed than dynamic achievement, as for instance “ the skills of riding a bike”, something learned and then you know it.

Capacity is defined as 1a) the ability to receive, accommodate, or deal with sthg b) ability to contain 2) legal competence or power (ibid p.131) whereas *capability* linked to capacity refers to 1) being capable 3) the capacity for indicated use or development. These definitions refer to a specific amount of capacities and could be, in my opinion, an alternative to competence as a frame of reference, however, in my opinion this is a more fixed measure than a dynamic achievement.

Competence is defined as “1) the quality of state of being competent 2) the innate human capacity to acquire use and understand language 3) sufficiency of means for the necessities

and conveniences of life “ (ibid, p. 185) whereas *competent* is defined as *1) having requisite or adequate ability* (ibid).

My research question refers to the adequate ability of relational competence in order to obtain satisfactory contact given the field conditions. This implies a dialogic attitude as described by Buber (1923) of being I – Thou instead of I – it oriented. The relational competence is a relational process oriented ability influenced by previous experiences hence the need of a word that will cover some necessary aspects of achievement.

Based on the field and phenomenological philosophy Gestalt therapy is non judgemental per se. Hence there are challenges in using words with attributed values to them, as for instance adequate or satisfactory contact. I will return to this ethical and philosophical question in my reflections on the writing process in chapter 7.

Due to the limitations of this paper I have to address some topics in favor of others. I have decided to leave out the philosophical discussion about the word *competence*. By using learning in the definition above, I include the aspect of achieving competence through learning. Further, in my section 4 on Gestalt theory, there will be discussions about abilities, competence developed from infancy onwards. I have also decided to leave out the philosophical aspect of learning as a hermeneutic process, which includes the phenomenological aspect of Heidegger or Husserl (Crocker 1999).

I have also left out the discussion of process models “*The Contact Cycle*” by Perls et al. (1951) and “*The Cycle of Experience*” by Zinker (1977) as well as discussions on “*Intimate Systems*” (Wheeler and Backman 1994), all important factors to the quality of relationships, the contact, the in-between of the co-creations.

The relational competence I describe is not an outcome of personality as a trait, a fixed measure. It is the competence that supports us at the boundary of the in-between. We might even say a relational competence of a couple, their competences meeting as a joint competence by how they relate with their mutual historical experience in the here and now.

My focus is the notion of relational competence and the process of using **the competence as is**, the creative adaptations of each individual unfolding in the couples' co-created field. This implies, from a therapeutic perspective, to be aware of figures emerging from the ground structures (Wheeler 1991).

Having defined the notion of relational competence from a Gestalt perspective I turn to the second research question:

Can I use the concept of relational competence to support me as a Gestalt therapist when working with couples?

4. THEORY: RELATIONAL COMPETENCE FROM A GESTALT PERSPECTIVE.

4.1. The Implications of Theory of Ground Structures.

Awareness is defined as the ultimate goal in Gestalt therapy (Perls et al 1954, p.75; Yontef 1988, p. 6). As previously mentioned the focus on ground structure by Wheeler in "*Gestalt Reconsidered*" (1991) altered the perspectives of Gestalt practice. By acknowledging the importance of past experiences and history, Wheeler introduced what became a new era in Gestalt theory and methodology.

In the epilogue of the second edition of "*Gestalt Reconsidered*" (1998), Roberts writes about the Gestalt environment, and how the book has been received and caused theoretical discussions. He presents Wheeler not as a revolutionary but as a reformer. Wheeler is not

revolting against the original text in by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951), but is reading the Gestalt Therapy with a different perspective, looking for blind-spots, claims Roberts.

Hence by taking the polarity of figure, the ground to consideration, Wheeler presents a much neglected topic. I quote from his conclusion:

*“... Harmony among these terms is satisfaction, or health: disharmony, dissatisfaction, is by definition, dysfunction. But, in the old psychodynamic landscape metaphor, this organization, this contact style, is contained “in” the ground (in process terms, we may say that these structures are the ground). Thus it is to those structures and that ground – and not to figure formation and figure destruction alone – that we must look, to understand the health or dysfunction of a particular person or system. The study of figures of contact, so richly elaborated and so productively applied by the Cleveland School in particular, is enhanced and rounded out by direct consideration of the underlying, **dynamically structured ground**. That is the whole argument of this book.”* (Wheeler1998).

Gestalt Reconsidered (ibid) is presented as “a new approach to contact and resistances” and received acclaim, especially, for presenting contact functions as creative adaptations to contact. However, Wheeler states in his conclusion that his foremost intentionality has been that of the dynamics, the interrelation between figure and the structured ground. This signifies the importance and necessity of taking into account the non-figural and out of awareness aspects of a persons adaptations to a situation and field conditions.

Wheeler points to the important works of the Cleveland school. Zinker is a significant contributor to the development of major theories and has been involved in establishing and teaching from the Cleveland School. Zinker indicates, in his book “*In Search of Good Form*” (1994), that he is looking at a person’s ground structure. He refers to this as the Apperceptive Mass and describes it as:

“one’s personal ground of life history – the totality of experiences that have made us who we are. It is our essence, our facticity, and our structured personal ground. The apperceptive mass, as ground, consists of memories, imagination, dreams, unconscious inspiration, spontaneous bodily sensations, and the like. From this ground, in response to what is evoked by being present with the client-system, spring spontaneous insights such as images, feelings, and metaphors that the therapist can develop into interventions to further heighten awareness.” (p. 34/35)

It is interesting to notice how Zinker acknowledges the persons ground, and further applies it to a possibility of the therapist for interventions. However, he does not present the possibilities this offers to the entire field. I believe the ground structures are implicit in much of his work discussed and presented, but rarely referred to.

Yontef refers to the development in the 1980’s of *“ bringing the here and now figure and the historical background into more of a synthesis. We have learned that it is important to be aware of background. Therapy and theory have become more effective, but not as simple as before”* (1988, p. 11).

4.2. Perspectives on Theoretical Models Regarding Structured Ground and Competence.

Whines introduces in his paper, *“Contact, field conditions and the “symptom-figure”* (1999) the need of *“clear mapping of the historical field and contact styles”* (p.9). This is presented for the purpose of meeting the demand of short-term therapy by Governmental Health Care Programs and Services. Whines introduces the terminology of *“symptom-figure”* as an assessment/diagnoses of figure (symptom). By the symptom-figure he addresses the parental contact style, historical field and formation of child’s contact style, summed up in *“ the back*

then” (ibid,p. 12). The “back-then” is then compared to the contemporary field and diagnosed.

Whines is discussing important ideas, corresponding to my own proposal, by addressing the influence of the “back-then” and how this is influencing the contemporary field. I support his idea of clear mapping of the historical background combined with the contact styles in order to do short term therapeutic work.

The issue of relational competence of an individual can be further understood by applying the attachment theories as described by Harris (1996). In his paper “*Attachment Theory: Some Implications for Gestalt Therapy*” he says:

“ *Attachment Theory has been developed over the last fifty years as one way of understanding the foundations of our capacity and need to make and sustain relationships*” (p.103).

Harris presents surveys of attachment studies during the first developmental years, related to the upbringing of and relation to significant others. These studies are combined with later studies of behaviours and attachments styles of the same group in adult years.

Harris points to how different neglecting behaviours by caretakers, called significant others, mostly mothers in these studies from the post-war era, resulted in dysfunctional, relational behavior in adult life. He presents the dysfunctional attachment styles following different neglects as, “*dismissing-detached, preoccupied-entangled, unresolved-disorganised behavior and autonomous-secure*” (p. 106), the last being the outcome of a healthy, secure base.

Harris applies the attachment theories to the Gestalt phenomenological approach. He states:

“ Following Gordon Wheeler (Wheeler 1991, p. 118) I would see attachment relationships as one of the structures of ground that is a major condition of figure formation and that kind of figure achieved is dependent on the type of attachment relationships that lie in the client’s history” (1996, p. 107).

This statement is underpinning one of the main proposals in my paper. An outcome of the structured ground is the relational competence unfolding in the co-created field.

4.3. Contribution to Gestalt of the Study of Ground Structure and Relational Competence.

By applying the theories of Harris and Whines as well as other significant psychological research, for instance the theories of embodiment by Kepner (1987), Frank (2001) and Stern (2004) and also Beaumont’s Fragile Self Process (1993) to Wheelers perspective on ground structures will facilitate awareness on possible figures emerging. The notion of relational competence may function and cover important aspects of a person’s creative adaptations in the co-creation. I believe and argue that assumptions and hypothesis about possible structures of ground are important in order to do well addressed, lasting therapeutic interventions.

The difficulty is that the structured ground, attachment theories and the relational competence achieved over a person’s life span easily can be related to and used as know-how and content-based approaches. One looks for a cause of the behavior here and now instead of using the phenomenological and process form by being creative indifferent, a creative indifference defined by Perls as the fertile void, the middle point (1947 p. 6). Hence a challenge is to employ the concept of ground and relational competence as possibilities for therapeutic interventions based on a neutral perception in order to raise awareness and support the

relational competence. **The relational competence employed as the creative adaptations of each part in the co-created field.**

Yontef (1988) says:

“Gestalt Therapy is an art based on clear, phenomenologically based awareness and dialogic contact and any suggestions based on group data, such as diagnosis, are only suggestive and helpful for the therapist’s growth in perspective” (p. 454).

It is to this statement I add relational competence. We must as Gestalt therapists be able to dismiss a hypothesis or figure that does not correspond or apply to the situation here- and now. However, by having a wider specter of references to draw on increase the ranges of choice available.

Susanna and Eric.

Susanna and Eric first came to therapy as she was suffering from panic attacks prior to getting married. Although she loved him dearly, she was so frightened of committing to Eric they had to cancel their wedding. During the course of couples counseling, she also went for individual sessions and they married the following year.

After being married for seven years Susanna and Eric returned to couples work. Susanna had had an affair with another man for a short period of time, before Eric came to know about it. Susanna and Eric decided to give their relationship first priority and asked for counseling. She broke up with her lover. In therapy Susanna and Eric became aware of how they mutually withdrew from each other. This followed a particular pattern. Susanna would flirt with other men. Eric approved of her need for attention. This proved that his wife was desirable to others. Their love life flourished.

After a while Eric would feel she was pushing his limits too far. He felt ignored, jealous and disrespected. He would respond by withdrawing, seeking comfort in watching porn. Susanna would in turn pay attention to Eric, desperate and frantic, no longer flirting with other men. She would support Eric's need for sexual stimulation and fantasies. Their love life peaked. However, eventually Susanna would disapprove of her husband spending so much time in front of the computer. They would argue, or rather fight, about this for some time, until he would admit to his distractions and pay attention to his wife's needs. She in turn would respond by going back to flirt with other men. This was how they co-created for seven years, with increased anger, outbursts and fights. This peaked when Susanna got more seriously involved with another, which broke Susanna and Eric's unspoken contract of their interlocking pattern.

In counseling, the couple and the therapist worked with the withdrawal and coming together, mostly by sex (confluence). Susanna and Eric became aware of how they mutually arranged their life, their co-creation. By exploring their ground structures, paying attention to their histories and family structures, they realized that neither were used to close and intimate relations. Susanna's parents split when she was 5 years old and her father moved abroad. She rarely saw him during her childhood and adolescence. Her mother was strict and showed little affection for Susanna and her brother. Eric's background differed to a great extent to that of Susanna. His parents were highly respected academics and during his upbringing attention was mostly paid to the academic achievements and rarely to accommodate the need of the children.

By working with their interlocking pattern, Susanna and Eric became aware of the tension and fear of being close without sex to support intimacy. This was unknown territory and difficult to live. One of them chose to withdraw. When one withdrew, the other came after and vice versa. The balance, the middle ground (Zinker 1994) was difficult to obtain and as a

consequence the couple was exhausted. By becoming relationally aware they discovered the need to work with their relational competence (incompetence). They explored how they each used their relational competence in order to accommodate their longing for attention and love. Further they explored their joint relational figures of intimacy, negotiation, boundaries and facing their existential fears of abandonment. As a result they became engaged with each other at another level. Eventually they had enough relational competence in being close and yet differentiated and the necessary mutual support they were able to leave therapy. Being relationally attached and aware at a different level they could handle their relational challenges outside the therapeutic setting. The healing and developmental potential of the relationship (Yontef 1988 p. 31) is evident.

This case illustrates the co-created field, how the couple arranges their life together. The significance of confluence by sex and withdrawal, the creative adaptations to contact that were not giving them the intimacy they both wanted (Wheeler and Backman 1994). By using the notion of relational competence and looking to the theories of Wheeler, Whines and Harris the therapist had some potential hypothesis of the underlying needs, the stuckness and the creative adaptation of the couple. These would unfold as a recurring figure of the field, in the in-between of the couple. By becoming aware of their interlocking dynamic, the mutual influence of the dysfunctional pattern, Susanna and Eric were motivated to look at other ways of being together. In a safe environment as offered by the therapist and by the couple itself they could experiment with new ways of relating that corresponded better with their innate needs of being close, met and loved. Their relational competence as adequate responses to the figures emerging in the in-between.

5. DISCUSSION: CAN I USE THE CONCEPT OF RELATIONAL COMPETENCE TO SUPPORT ME WHEN WORKING WITH COUPLES?

5.1. Relational Competence and Relational Awareness.

I have defined relational competence and applied this definition to the structures of ground as proposed by Wheeler (1991). I claim that the relational competence emerges out of the structures of ground and becomes figural in the co-created situation. Further I have made explicit the importance of the relational stance as presented by Yontef (1988) and Wollants (2007), in which one acknowledges the co-creation of a field fundamentally. I argue that the competence a person acquires during a life span is of great importance in that co-creation. I also point to the joint relational competence of a couple, their structures of ground, their history and experience of being together.

Yontef (1988) states:

“The practice and theory of Gestalt therapy is built on the importance of being aware of our awareness process... (p. 284)

and Perls (in Wollants 2007):

“A Gestalt therapist must have a relational awareness of the total situation” (p. 155)

In therapy raising awareness about how each person (the I) uses his or hers relational competence in the relationship will increase the ranges of choice of negotiating at the boundary.

Ann and Peter:

Greeting Ann and Peter in their first session the therapist welcomed a seemingly happy couple, friendly, smiling towards and very attentive to each other. When sitting down the couple each placed the chair closer to their partner.

Being phenomenally and relationally aware of the couple's entry to therapy the therapist initially got ideas of possible structures of ground as for instance boundaries (Polster 1974), Fragile Self Process (Beaumont 1993), Attachment theories (Harris 1996) and confluence (Perls et al. 1951) that might be figural at later stages of therapy. The theories act as ground structures, possibilities to draw on for the therapist. By using his or hers relational competence of being field sensitive to accommodate the couple's request for therapy, the therapist needed to be aware of possible figures of importance for the couple's dynamics.

Lisa and Andrew

Lisa and Andrew came to counseling two years into their relationship. It soon became evident that their co-creation was rigid and locked. Andrew was blaming Lisa for not being available to him. Lisa would easily deflect or withdraw, as she was uncomfortable with his anger and accusations. By working with their relational competence it became evident that their communication was based on how they were used to adapt in earlier relationships and by the experience of each other. They would employ well-known communicating strategies in order to survive within the relationship. They were using their relational competence as best as they could in order to stay together.

Coming to therapy and raising awareness on how they mutually influenced each other, learning basic gestalt communicating strategies (Zinker 1994), improved their competence in relating to the actual situation that arose, coping with the necessary task at hand, reaching for the best available choice for dealing with the present situation.

By being in a safe environment they were able to explore new behavioural strategies. Andrew would try to accept his fear of being abandoned or abandoning Lisa himself. He had experienced being left much by himself by his parents at a young age. After sessions of counseling he would be more accepting to Lisa's need to withdraw from heated discussions and admit that the situation was not similar to that of his childhood. He had responsibilities and options as an adult and was a part of the interlocking pattern. Lisa expressed how she was afraid of conflicts and loud voices having parents with many arguments during her upbringing. In couples therapy she experienced how she could take care of her own boundaries and stand up for herself and by this meeting Andrew with a different approach to negotiations at the boundary. She became a more predictable and congruent partner. The increased abilities to discuss important matters stimulated the relationship and provided the couple with energy and re-engagement.

Within four sessions the couple agreed that they had gained more insight into their own and their partners adaptations in their co-creation, and how their mutually encouraged repetitive behavior. Having explored their relational competence and having relational awareness of the situations, they were no longer dependent on the counselor to support them in their co-creational field. This proved to be a successful short-term therapy, encouraging the developmental and healing potential of the relationship.

By having relational awareness about the relational competence available, the co-creation will be an important figure in working towards a more creative and functional interaction. The "stuckness" will eventually be replaced by awareness and ability to move through a "healthy" Contact Cycle (Perls et al.1951) or Cycle of Experience (Zinker 1977), depending on which cycle one chose to work with for therapeutic purposes.

The notions of relational awareness and relational competence apply to the entire therapeutic field, the therapist as well as the couple, family or the individual. We are working acknowledging the entire field, hence it is not relevant to attribute the relational awareness or the apperceptive mass to the therapist only as Zinker suggests (1994 p. 34/35). The clients have their own relational competence. The total sum of the parts is more than the single parts. Certainly, the therapist is, preferably, more aware and competent of the present co-created figure, but it does not imply that the therapist has the better knowledge or more competence of the field as is. However, by employing the Gestalt models as interventions, the therapist has a wider range of choice in bringing awareness to the field.

Being a process-oriented writer, I will propose a simple model that can be used in order to look at the entire field unfolding.

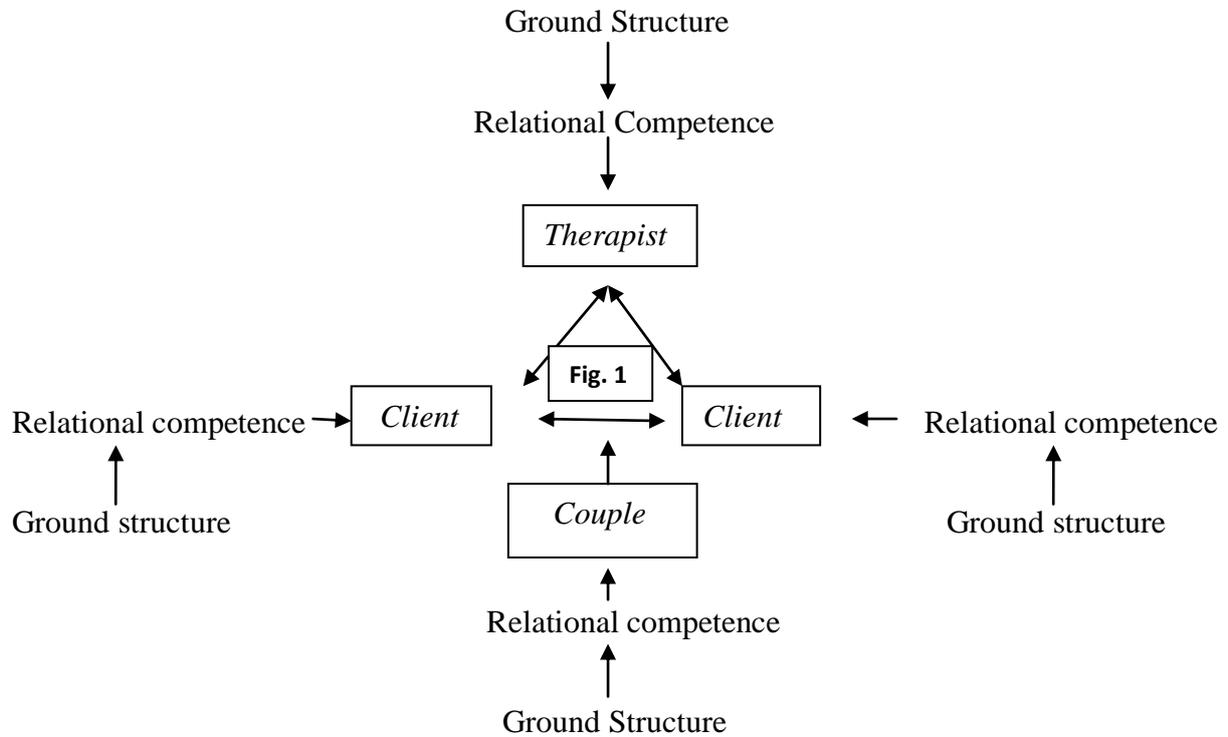
Yontef says:

“ I believe that we often pay insufficient attention to the conditions in the field ”

(Jacobs and Hycner 2009, p. 45) and it is to this I claim the necessity of awareness of the relational competence, as it evolves from the structures of ground.

5.2. Process model of Relational Awareness and Relational Competence.

Relational awareness of the co-created field (figure1) emerging from the structures of ground:



By employing this model we are concerned with the co-creation, how each person's relational competence is functional in the current field. Issues are dealt with from this perspective, phenomenally. Creative adaptations will repeat themselves as a returning figure (figure 1) between the couple and would be dealt with, processed and acted through. This will enable the couple to have a choice in solving "stuckness" of old patterns of behavior.

Ellen and Peter.

Ellen and Peter had been married for 12 years and they came to counseling on Ellen's request because of her returning thoughts of divorce. After a few sessions their co-creation (the couple's relational competence of the in-between) of isolation became a strong figure (figure 1). Ellen, disclosed, quiet and retroflective (relational competence of the client) and Peter aggressive and harsh, he left a session in anger (relational competence of the client). They each isolated the other employing their most known creative adaption or relational competence. By gentle interventions, based on the relational competence and awareness of the therapist, the therapist worked on raising relational awareness between the couple of the figure of mutual withdrawal (figure 1). The couple admitted to their communicative strategies being dysfunctional, disabling either partner to meet the innate longing of being met by the other.

Ellen admitted that her relational competence of being quiet and detached was a mean of punishing Peter for his outbursts or imaginary lack of interest in her. Peter in turn would be triggered by Ellen's unresponsiveness and he agreed that his relational competence was inadequate as he was unable to get the response from Ellen that he longed for. They would not meet at a boundary where they both could enjoy the company of the other without giving up on their own innate need. As a result the threat of divorce had a paralyzing effect on the couple. The stuckness in the fighting process and the isolation of the other slowly wore down their marriage. Isolation was as difficult to handle for Ellen, experiencing anxiety of Peter's outbursts as for Peter, terrified by Ellen's withdrawal and threat of divorce, both unable to reach out to each other in their separateness.

With the increase of awareness of the co-created figure and how they each lacked appropriate relational competence to manage their struggle, the therapist would work on the figure of

adequate relational competence and as the co-creation or figure was unfolding. By paying attention to the family structures and the difficult environment Ellen and Peter provided for their children the couple found mutual agreement of working towards a more functional dynamic. How could they establish a different way of communicating their wants and longings? Their childhood traumas had resulted in the couple's dismissing-detached relationship (Harris 1996), the threats and isolation being familiar to both of them. By wanting to provide their children with a different perspective and different role models for their future, Ellen and Peter decided that they wanted to work hard together and individually in order to learn a more adequate relational competence of being flexible in the in-between opting for satisfactory contact. They embarked on what became a long-term and successful therapy. They managed to save their marriage and lived through repetitive figures of dismissing- detached behavior. Eventually they became increasingly aware of their mutual co-creation, their responsibilities in the co-creation hence more accepting and caring for the other as their repetitive patterns reappeared. The dismissing –detached behavior became less threatening and they learned to favor a dialogic approach to reach each other.

The relationally competent therapist is the relationally aware therapist. The therapist needed to be creative indifferent in order to hold the balance between the parts of the couple. In this case providing the couple with enough support in order to manage their struggle of intimacy and demand. The relational competent therapist has the necessary skills to meet the couple with an aesthetic presence. The therapist acknowledges the responsibility that lies in the professional setting.

By working long-term with the couple the relational competence of the entire field would be likely to emerge. There would be a common ground structure, the experience of being together in the in-between which eventually would include the therapist. The therapist would seek supervision if needed and would be relationally aware and able to bracket. The therapist

always needs to keep in mind the basic of Gestalt therapy acting on the situation by a phenomenological approach, by being field sensitive and adjusting to the conditions of the field (Joyce & Sills 2010 p. 13; Korb et al. 1989 p. 109/111)

5.3. Conclusion: Relational Competence and Relational Awareness.

Having presented a process model as well as applying the notion of relational competence to couples work I believe I have demonstrated the usefulness of the concept of relational competence.

The concept of relational competence is a frame of reference in order to raise relational awareness. Relational awareness of the co-created field.

I deeply cherish the aesthetic value of “*Everyone does the best to his or hers ability and creatively adapts to the situation as best as he or she can*” (Latner 1986), the creative adaptations to contact as described by Wheeler (1994) in my private life and as a therapist. The notion of relational competence is helpful to achieve relational awareness of the creative adaptations unfolding in the in-between of the relationship.

With relational competence I will as a Gestalt therapist have all my education and practice as well as my own lived life to support me in the quest of raising awareness in the therapeutic field. Employing my own relational competence enables me to adjust and to be field sensitive to the needs of my clients.

6. REFLECTIONS ON THE WRITING PROCESS AND THE WIDER FIELD.

6.1. Ability for Self Support.

Being a student at the Norwegian Gestalt Institute and having most of my training and therapy from lecturers in this environment, Metanoia Institute has introduced different ideas on practicing Gestalt, comprehension of terminology and adding additional theories to my repertoire. This has been an exciting experience but also a challenge in respect to work with the dissertation. I have been more aware of the necessity of differentiation in the assimilating process in order to develop my own set of values and fundamental ground.

Roberts, in his epilogue of Gestalt Reconsidered (Wheeler 1998) addresses the psychoanalytical heritage and the ambivalence between the Modernistic and the Post modernistic era. He states:

“it’s still difficult for us to grasp the Postmodern idea of “reality” as a field of relationships” (p. 185).

and Stawman:

“Some effort will be required if these discoveries (... the biologic complexity with which we interact, coregulate, empathise, attach and more....), mostly presented in reductionist terms, are to be usefully assimilated into Gestalt’s holistic framework.”

(in Jacobs/Hycner 2009, p. 29)

Through my work I have found myself caught in the dilemma of the causal way of thinking versus the phenomenological stance. To quote Wollants (2007):

“The use of the term “unhealthy cycle” or “healthy cycle” (see Clarkson 1989) is already inadmissible from a phenomenological standpoint. A cycle is only a description tool, and a tool cannot be healthy or unhealthy” (p. 100)

All through my dissertation this dilemma has been a challenge. I have chosen to refrain from using much focus on giving opinions and values to phenomena. Without other methods of expressing healthy functioning versus dysfunction, I am a follower of Zinker (1977), putting an aesthetic value in a therapeutic setting.

A persistent performer of the phenomenological approach is that of my lecturer in Norway, Daan van Baalen. He operates, in my opinion, this approach in its purest form. I appreciate and admire greatly his way of practicing therapy. However, by taking into account my personal process of becoming aware of my dysfunctions in order to sustain a relationship, I have been in quest of finding a way to apply the past in my Gestalt practice, recently with the focus on couples work. Baalen and I have had interesting discussions about ground structures and figure formation. We dispute the application of ground structure to figure formation. I have argued my position by this dissertation.

I experience a more confronting orientation of doing couples work with Lynda Osborne at Metanoia Institute in London. What impresses me is the balance she is holding in couples work. I admire her grading, doing the balance of holding, being fiercely and at the same time having a tenderness of the shaming potential in a relational setting. The focus on the co-creation of the relation. No one would be let off the hook, but would need to face responsibility for the interaction. To me she has demonstrated the art of finely tuned couples' work.

By having the dual experience of the NGI and Metanoia Institute I am encouraged and feel more competent as a couples therapist. In finding my own style of practice, the couples training and working with this dissertation have provided me with much useful knowledge. I feel encouraged to embark on and feel I have valuable relational competence and insight in order to work in the difficult and inspiring field of couple's struggles.

6.2. Did I succeed in doing what I set out to do?

I concluded that relational competence emerging from the ground structure can be used to raise relational awareness. I did not arrive at the conclusion I first set out to explore, the importance of relational competence at the boundaries of the in-between. The insight of doing the research and arriving at the conclusion of the importance of relational awareness in the place of relational competence was a kind of AHA-experience. By employing the notion of relational competence it seems easy to fall into the causal way of thinking, hence I prefer to call for awareness on the phenomena. Due to the complexity of the relational stance a therapist has to be particularly aware of the co-creation. In this respect doing the dissertation as well as complementary couples training, have made me more competent in the field of couples work. I am more attentive to the difficulties implied in therapy of the situation per se.

Looking through the dissertation the word relational is over represented. However, as we are developing under a new paradigm as described much by Yontef (1988 ; in Jacobs/Hycner 2009), Wollants (2007) and Roberts (in Wheeler 1998) to raise awareness and keep in mind the complexities involved, the word relational acts as a constant reminder about the easiness of being caught in the causal paradigm, the Western society's habit of meaning making.

The challenges of changing to a relational paradigm could act as an example of how we all know about difficulties of altering a set of mind. One could compare the set of a causal mind to the set of a "dysfunctional, relationally incompetent" mind. As you know of nothing else,

this is your “normal” way of relating. To alter dysfunctional behavior is not a matter simply of being aware of a dysfunction. I experienced being dysfunctional, something not working although I had the best of intentions. What is functional? One has to experience the notion of “good- function” in order to know what to go for. I am an admirer Zinker’s aesthetic value in therapy, his fundamentally accepting approach to the human struggles and his reflections on working with “ good enough” (1994, p. 29) .

Having had the important insight of the co-creation of the relationship, I strongly believe in the great potential and yet fairly unknown possibilities of the relational approach. This implies that in therapy you do not start with one of the parts, you address the figure of the entire field, the co-creation. I acknowledge that in my private life, I did play an important part of the relational struggles, but I also claim that the same is true of my partners. It was the co-creation that triggered the struggles. How we responded in the relation of co-creation. The shift in recognition and raised awareness of the phenomena enabled me and my husband to negotiate on a different level, at the boundary. We each acknowledged how we mutually shared the responsibility and we were willing to accept and own our contribution. This made an important impact on **the being, the in-between, the interaction and connection.**

Having relational awareness about the relational competence and our co-creation my husband and I are more flexible and have a range of choices in order to solve the potential conflicts we meet by living close and intimate.

6.3. The Wider Field.

I am married to a Swedish man. What seems to be a simple blend of two countries does in fact complicate the co-created field. We experience the likeliness of stumbling upon differences, misunderstandings, areas of conflict from the smallest gesture, an intonation to traditions. I cannot help being in awe of the complexities following marriages of different ethnical backgrounds, religions, remarried couples with children and ex's, lesbians and homosexuals and many other special blends outside the traditional pattern. Do they have relational challenges bigger than others? Maybe or maybe not. Maybe their relational competence is adequate to handle the challenges well enough?

The relational challenges in today's society compared to that of previous centuries are surely one of the reasons for the increase in divorce-rates. An ethical question is if it is reasonable to believe that in the Post Modern era, with life expectancy the double of prior generations and the dynamics of globalization are we to expect a monogamist, life-long companionship? In my opinion, Zinker's Good Form model (1994), where both parties involved are willing to participate with good intentions or if not, agree on separating, is of great importance. There is the existential perspective so fundamental to Gestalt of taking your share of the responsibility in the relation as well as in your own life, you should be able to take your share of responsibility in the relationship and do the best of your relational competence.

To me Perls' poem is not representing the individualistic egotistical way, as he has been accused of, but is rather a spiritual way of looking at the mutual responsibility of the co-creation of a relationship.

I do my thing and you do your thing.

I am not in this world to live up to your expectations.

And you are not in this world to live up to mine,

You are you and I am I,

If by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.

If not, it can't be helped.

(Perls, 1969: b:4)

Not all marriages or partnerships are meant to be.

6.4. Looking further:

Interestingly or ironically published February 3rd 2012 in Norway's biggest female magazine (KK, 2012, p. 40) is a portrait of the four most acknowledged couple psychologists in Norway today, amongst them, Gran and Thuen. Under the heading "*What Life has Taught Us about Love*" there is the subheading: "*They are all divorced. And THEY are supposed to teach us to save the marriage*".

In my introduction I describe my two divorces and how I felt a failure in reading columns and self-help books. Times have changed for me the last decade and I feel less of a failure and shame about my "misfortune". However, I must admit that separations cause pain and worries, amongst them to raise children in two homes instead of being the happy family we started out with. I believe a divorce or a break-up always contains an element of a broken dream. I reflect on my children's own relational competence and how they will establish themselves in their love lives. I am aware of how they might have been influenced. The world is never perfect, but I try my best and hope for "good enough".

Through my studies and training of Gestalt and by personal experience I have much to contribute in the field of couples work. By managing a long term relationship my husband and I finally understood something important. I believe a great drive and force in the human existence is intimate relations and love. With Gestalt we have important methods and philosophical perspectives that are important to address and make more commonly known, at least in the Norwegian society. This would be a future prospect to me as well as the everlasting nourishing of my own relationship, my family first and foremost.

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