Interaction and Repetition: Qualitative Analysis of Interactional Sequences between Couples in Therapy *

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The purpose of this study was to identify possible patterns of interaction between partners in couples' therapy, including repetitive patterns assumed to serve as "relational defences", and to determine whether couples seem to cooperate in defending against psychic pain both for themselves and each other.

Sequences of interaction between each of fifteen couples were observed on video recordings of a couple therapy session by three observers who studied verbal communication, meta-communication in relation to the specified topics (themes) of closeness/distance and gratification/frustration for each couple on three occasions. (Interactional Sequence Analysis).

*The results revealed, at a general level of analysis, the patterns of reciprocity, symmetry and the movement from reciprocity to symmetry and vice versa within a given sequence. At a different level of analysis, within these categories, many different sub-patterns were identified. However, contrary to our strongly held hypothesis about repetitive patterns in dysfunctional interaction, the results showed that half of the couples repeated a given sub-pattern, and the other half varied their sub-patterns across occasions. Significantly the various sub-patterns served the purpose of **preventing change**, indicating that what clinically seems like repetition of **patterns**, represents continued and varied relational **efforts to avoid confrontation with painful psychic material both for themselves and on behalf of the partner.**

February 1995

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to identify and investigate possible repetitive interactional patterns between couples in therapy. Clinically, repetition is typical in dysfunctional relationships. Partners complain that they feel "stuck", are "not getting anywhere", "it is the same all over again all the time" etc. Authors have pointed out how couples are caught in vicious circles, repeat typical, stereotypic behaviour etc. (Lederer & Jackson, 1968, Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1969, Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, Willi & al. 1993.) These observations, however, have not been specifically targeted in research. (Henriksen & Sønderland, 1994).

Freud (1914) coined the term "repetition compulsion" to describe how patients would act out psychic material, "not as a memory, but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it." (p. 150). Repeating traumatic experiences in thoughts and dreams represents efforts at mastery as well as a possibility of working through the pain. Freud argued that repetition of unconscious conflicts influences both partner choice and interaction. People repeat both in order to avoid experiencing painful psychic material, and as a way to to remember. In this way

time the repetition points to a possible solution of the problem. The dialogue keeps the issue alive.

Targets in the present study were not typical *behaviour profiles* of partners. These have been extensively described in the literature, for example "the gruesome twosome", "the weary wanglers" (Lederer & Jackson, 1968), "the blamer" and the "placater" (Satir, 1972), "equal-companionate" marriage, the "romantic-romantic" marriage (Sager & Hunt, 1978), the "dominant/ aggressive-submissive/masochistic" marriages. (Eisenstein, 1956), the "weak-strong" partners. (Karpel, 1977). Instead our focus was on *the anatomy of a limited sequence of interaction,* in other words geared towards a different level of analysis. The question was: what kind of interaction, what quality, what "make of" interaction is taking place?

The "discovery-oriented" research questions were:

1. Is it possible to identify specific patterns of interaction between partners in therapy?
2. Is it possible to identify repetitive interactions between partners in therapy?
3. Given repetitive interaction, do these interactions seem to have a defensive function?
4. Do partners conspire to maintain dysfunctional interactions?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The method of analysis was developed on the basis of dialectic and psychoanalytic theory of relations. (Kohut, 1971, 1977, Fairbairn, 1952, Wynne, 1968, Bowen, 1971, Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1969, 1986 and Stierlin, 1969, 1974, 1980, Benjamin, 1988). Characteristics of this theoretical background are:

1. The relationship between the self and the object rather than instincts is seen as crucial in the formation of the self.
2. Not only the relationship but the delineation or differentiation of self in the relationship is decisive for the development and maintenance of the self.
3. One person's self is seen as being constituted in part by the delineation or differentiation needs in the other person and vice versa.

The theoretical views, then, were chosen in an attempt to bridge the self and others without loosing a dynamic view of the self and the relationship including the intimate mutuality between the dynamics of "inward" and "outward" forces. (Løvlie, 1982a, 1982b, Løvlie Schibbye, 1988, Bae & Waastad, 1992).

Concepts or descriptions warranting further explanation are differentiation, the "relational unconscious" and "sequences of interactional processes".

Differentiation

In order to understand the self in the relationship we need a concept of differentiation. Problems of differentiation are found in mother-child, partner- and family interactions. (Winnicott, 1965, Mahler, 1975, Stierlin, 1969, 1980, Wynne, 1969, Bowen, 1971, Minuchin, 1974). To be differentiated means that the individual is able to

identfy his experiences, feelings and thoughts as *belonging to him, not to the other(s)*. A central assumption is that self-differentiation is continually challenged in close relationships, and indeed in relationships in general. (Stierlin, 1980, Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, Willi, 1975). If, for example, a mother has problems acknowledging her anger at her infant because such feelings threaten her self-image, she can project these feelings into the infant and interpret reactions in the baby as angry. In this way she can projectively identify, i.e. differentiate herself as "not angry" in relation to the "angry child". (Bowen, 1971, Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1969, Ogden, 1979). When tension in the relationship increases, the child will express the anger for both of them, enabling the mother to function with less anxiety. The recipient in a dysfunctional relationship has a corresponding emotional stake in carrying this psychic material. Both have differentiation problems regarding anger. In extreme cases this dialogue develops into a pattern, and becomes an habitual way of dealing with anger.

A problem in clinical research is that theoretical language is lagging behind clinical language. Clinically the above relationship could be described in terms of the way in which the partners "live a feeling". The mother and child described above "live anger" in a way in which the mother does not recognize her anger as hers; rather the child expresses it on behalf of them both. In other words, they "live a given feeling", in this case anger, in such a way that she denies and the child expresses angry feelings. Neither the mother nor the child is aware of this unconscious "bargain". The child's anger is not really "his" or "hers", and the mother is unaware of any anger in her self. In this process the childs feelings become "false" in Winnicott's sense because their origin is not in the child, but in the mother. (1965).

The Relational Unconscious

The relational unconscious includes:

1. Those aspects of the self the individual is not consciously experiencing as belonging to the self,
2. Those aspects of the self which tend to be projected and experienced as belonging to the other(s). And conversely, an individual may be unaware of the fact that he or she accepts and contains psychic material which "belongs" to the other(s) as if it were their own. In clinical terms we "live" certain aspects of ourselves *in* the other or *for* the other. Partners, f. example, seem to conspire to manage their fragility, dependency and painful affect *for or on behalf of* each other, i.e. both cooperate in an effort to "take care of" a shared problem. In a functional relationship on the other hand, we negotiate "ownership of experience" in an ongoing process.
3. Those aspects of the self which underlie repetitive patterns described as "repetition compulsion" by Freud.

Sequences of Interactional Processes

In a dialogue it is possible to identify a *theme* (what the dialogue is about), and secondly to identify the meta-language, i.e. *feelings* and *experiences* the partners seem to express in relation to the theme. Finally the communicative activities *define the relationship between them*. (Watzlawick et al. 1967). Thus, when observing the interaction it is possible to determine the theme, and make a note of how the partners react to the theme, i.e. we look at their body language to determine the meta-language.

The question becomes: How do the partners act and feel in relation to a theme? Or in clinical terms: How do partners "live" a given theme?

An interactional sequence includes various aspects which need to be included in research on relationships:

1. An interactional sequence is a *part* of the larger, total relationship the partners share.
2. An interactional sequence involves *process*. We are not dealing with static entities. Thus we should potentially be able to learn about *change*.
3. An interactional sequence or sequences should reveal defensive activity between the partners and thus *unconscious processes*.
4. An interactional sequence provides information about problems in reflection, e.i. lack of awareness og both self-experiences and relational experiences as well as a corresponding weakening of *self-differentiation*.
5. An interactional sequence or sequences reveal information about the influence of *social factors*, such as expressed in, for example, sexual roles.
6. An interactional sequence reveals inner *experiences* based on observations of overt action. In this sense an interactional sequence illuminates *the relationship between "inner" and "outer" processes*. (See Stern's work on interactions between infant and caretaker. (1985).

Themes

In any interactional sequence the dialogue is "about something", i.e. there is a mutual theme involved in communication. The conversation has a topic, such as child-rearing, in-laws, hobbies, sexual problems etc. Any subject-matter demanding shared attention could be a theme. Admittedly the choice of themes for research on partner interaction is complex. The manifest theme may not be the "real" theme for example. In our study the most manifest theme was focused during the observations.

The theme determines the length of a sequence. The sequence starts when a given theme is introduced, and is completed when the theme is changed or the interchange about the theme subsides.

For the present study the themes chosen were: *closeness/distance* and *gratification/frustration*. The reasons for this choice were:

1. Stierlin (1969) argued convincingly that these themes, among others, have to be negotiated in close relationships.
2. Clinical experience with partners in therapy supports the central position of these themes.
3. During trial observations of video recordings it became clear that these themes could be identified by the observers, and that they appeared to be emotionally significant.

METHOD

Interactional Sequence Analysis

The interactional phenomena in which we were interested could best be uncovered by qualitative analyses of video-taped recordings of *real live* dialogues. Researchers in the area of mother-infant interaction have also adopted this method with great success. (Stern, 1985, Schaffer, 1984a). The greatest challenge when investigating video-recordings of the interactions is to establish a framework for observation which neither violates the complexity, nor the systematization of the data. In an effort to balance these concerns a method called *"interactional sequence analysis"* *(ISA)* was developed.

Subjects.

The subjects were fifteen couples who had been accepted for couple´s therapy at a clinic at the University of Oslo. The age range was from 20-50, but six of the couples were between 30 and 35. Fourteen couples were married at the time of the study and two lived together. Three couples had a previous marriage with children. Seven couples were the biological parents of their children and one couple was childless. Most of the couples were well-educated, intelligent and functioned within the neurotic and borderline categories without serious psychiatric disorders.

The Observers.

The observers were three psychodynamically trained therapists each of whom saw their share of the couples in therapy. The observers were familiar with the theoretical framework and trained in observational procedures.

The problem of observer bias rides the social researcher. Several have suggested that if you "can't beat it, join it". (Bateson, 1972, 1997, von Glasersfeld, 1985, Keeney, 1983, Frantzen, 1992, Reason & Rowan, 1981, Berg & Smith, 1988, Varela, 1976, 1979). The point is that the social researcher has an *intention, chooses* a position, and *constructs* the data. Investigators invariably enter into a *relationship* with the data, and need to be aware of the influence of their own selves on their observations. The researcher must be unyielding in his efforts to avoid a merger between his self and what he observes. In other words self-observation and self-reflection made possible through the ability to differentiate, are crucial for the social researcher. (Berg & Smith, 1988, Aanstoos, 1987). In view of these factors it was considered an advantage that the investigators were trained therapists as well as researchers, and had undergone or were undergoing psychotherapy..

The instruction the observers gave themselves was to scrutinize, check and re-check their own observation as well as those of their fellow observers.

Procedure

The three observers watched video tape-recordings of the first or second therapy session with each of the 15 couples. When one or more of the observers identified a theme, the video recording machine was turned off. The observers had to

reach agreement on any given theme before the analysis could begin. The most *manifest* theme was chosen. The actual *verbal* interchange involving the theme was then recorded verbatim on a separate tape-recorder. The sequence was then observed once more on video, and this time the body language (meta-language) was recorded. Then the body language was combined with its original verbal message. Finally the combination of the verbal communication and the meta-communication was subjected to clinical interpretation. This interpretation was not accepted unless the three observers were in agreement.

A short example may be instructive. A wife, Mrs. B could say "you are always pulling away from me..." The theme was identified as belonging to the theme *closeness/distance*. The video-recorder was stopped temporarily, and the *verbal* message was read into the tape recorder. The partner's verbal response was recorded in the same way. Having recorded the verbal messages, the observers turned to the video and examined the sequence once more. This time the *body language* was recorded. For example, for Mrs. B who said "you are pulling away from me..", the body language was recorded as follows: "leans her head back, squints, crosses her legs. The voice is loud." This description of the body-language was added on in parenthesis following the verbal message. At this stage we interpreted the message including the meta-language clinically: Appears demanding, angry and accusing. The husband's, Mr. B's, answer was similarly recorded, and Mrs. B's return response etc. until the sequence was completed. The complete interactional sequence analysis was then recorded as follows:

> She: "You are always pulling away from me.." (Leans her head back, squints, crosses her legs. The voice is loud.)
> *Interpretation*: Appears demanding, angry and accusing.
>
> He: "How can you say that? I have given up my golf so that we could have more time together..." (Low voice, leans a bit back, bends his head slightly, presses his lips together.)
> *Interpretation*: Condescending, "patiently" appealing to her to be reasonable. Denies anger.
>
> She "That is really the least you could do!" (Loud voice, angry facial expression.)
> *Interpretation*: Angry and blaming.

At this stage we were ready for a summary analysis, i.e. an interactional sequence analysis: "The couple lives the theme *closeness/distance* in a way in which she accuses him and demands closeness, and he is apologetic, but maintains distance by deferring to his wife."

The sequences involving an identified theme were unexpectedly short, and rarely included more than three or four verbal exchanges. To indicate that a sequence was terminated, the couples changed the subject, looked away or at the therapist.[1] When one analysis was recorded, the observations of the video were resumed, a new theme identified and analysed until all the analyses were completed.

A total of 90 interactional sequence analyses were recorded, 45 on each of the two themes. For each couple, then, three analyses were made on each of two themes: 3 x 15 x 2 = 90.

As will be seen, this method of analysis is essentially the one used in the

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[1] Notably, Stern (1985) pointed out that babies seemed to need to terminate a dialogue with their mothers, and resume such dialogue after a period of "rest".

clinical method. The therapist notes *what* the dialogue is about, *how* it is presented, and makes a mental note in an effort to *understand* the client. In interactional sequence analysis the steps taken by the observer are made explicit and checked, not only by the individual observer, but by two colleagues.[2]

RESULTS

Complete Raw Data Analyses for one Couple

Initially the results will be presented as raw data, i.e. as one complete actual sequence, including the sequence analysis on each of two themes for a randomly selected couple given the names of Nan and Fred.[3]

Theme: Closeness / distance

Nan: "Anyway, when we have had sex...I..at least...I have felt that it was good. It isn't that often...., but OK, when we have slept together we both wanted it and...it....has been all right. It hasn't...yes...and I think you agree.... At least the way I experienced it..." (Looks at Fred, leans toward him. Has a "questioning" voice, hesitates in her approach.)
Interpretation: She appears submissive and insecure in her way of relating, seeking reassurance that all is OK between them.

Fred: "Yes" (Takes a puff of his cigarette, leans back as she continues to talk, avoids eye contact and looks away.)
Interpretation: Seems overbearing, indifferent, distances in the sense of lacking interest and involvement.

Nan: "I actually thought you rather liked it... There are... there are a number of such things that..." (Looks at Fred, learns forward, has the same submissive stance. Does not finish sentence.)
Interpretation: Submissive, gets vague, seems to ask for confirmation.

Fred: "There is one thing that has contributed...that is, it seems... When you start talking about freedom outside of yourself - we know very little about that yet...about how that will function...It is very unclear in a way...How will it shape our relationship? In terms of needing others? But it has happened... I am still seeing the girl I met on May first." (Monotone voice, avoids eye contact, seems uninvolved.)
Interpretation: Continues to distance, seems uninterested and pessimistic about the relationship. He undermines any contact or closeness by mentioning a possible involvement with another woman.

Interactional sequence analysis: Nan and Fred live the theme, closeness/distance in a way in which she approaches, however vaguely, and he pulls away and maintains distance. This seems to undermine Nan's attempt. She appears to

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[2] Several authors argue that the clinical method is a useful method in qualitative research. (Smith & Berg, 1988, Edelson, 1988, Lowman, 1988, Miles & Huberman, 1984, Huberman & Miles, 1988)

[3] Nan and Fred are recorded as no. 7 and no. 8 in the two analyses presented.

accept his "rejection".

The above interactional sequence analysis shows how the most manifest aspect of the dialogue was analyzed. Depending on the level of observation, from manifest to increasingly latent content other interpretation possibilities would emerge. For example we could hypothesize that she had a masochistic need to be submissive and hurt, and he a complementary sadistic need. However, in order to secure 100% agreement among the observers, only manifest content was analyzed.

Theme: Gratification / frustration

This analysis was based on a sequence from a later period in the session.

Nan: "Yes, in addition to the fact that I had some questions...Because I wonder myself...I find it hard to find out for myself what kind of demands I make..." (Looks at Fred, leans forward, bending her upper body and tilting her head upward.)
Interpretation: Questioning, submissive, seems insecure, asks for reassurance in a veiled fashion, unable to defend even reasonable demands she may have in her marriage.

Fred: "No, I do too." (Monotonous voice, leans back avoids eye contact.)
Interpretation: Seems uninterested and distant. Appears to reinforce her insecurity by a certain unresponsiveness and disconfirmation.

Nan: "Yes, of course I do have the impression right now... I don't know...that things turn up. It can be things like now it is a long time since you took care of Linda (baby daughter)... Linda turns away from you...in a way...Things like that...And then I say to you, like I did yesterday, remember: "You should give Linda more attention, or she will be a mama's baby". She yells and screams every time she has to have her diaper changed: "Mommy change them..." Like that you know..." (Careful, a bit pleading in her tone of voice. Submissive stance.)
Interpretation: Insecure, is vague, asks for gratification in a veiled or indirect way.

Fred: "U-hum..." (Looks straight ahead. Tense body posture.)
Interpretation: Continues to be distant, "uninterested", condescending.

Nan: "And then...I mean... it isn't primarily a demand on my part... it is meant as good advice...If you want to regain the contact you had with Linda. That is what I mean to say...". (Leans forward, low voice, tries to get eye contact.)
Interpretation: Apologetic, transforms a wish into an offer of closeness with the daughter. Submissive and seems to have problems expressing her needs directly, as well as to accept and defend her own needs.

Interactional sequence analysis: Nan and Fred live the theme gratification/frustration in a way in which she is asking for gratification in a veiled way, indicating that she is uncertain about whether demands can be made, and is defensive about her wishes for gratification. Fred lives the theme by frustrating her, not clarifying

his position and being evasive about whether or not he wants gratification from her.[4]

Display of the Interactional Sequence Analyses

The display problems involved in qualitative research has been pointed out by researchers. (Miles & Huberman, 1984). When recorded as raw data Nan & Freds verbalizations, especially Nan's, were typically muddled, redundant, characterized by stops and starts and "fill words".It was not only impractical, but impossible within the space requirements of an article to record verbatim.

Summary descriptions

For the above reasons it was decided to "translate" the original dialogues into a shorter, more manageable version, but to preserve the *pattern* observed. Thus summary descriptions were recorded for the couples in order to make displays of what might be called "the essence of the dialogue". Figure 1 and 2 shows the interactional summary analyses for Nan & Fred on the themes closeness/distance and gratitude/frustration respectively. Unit 1 in Figure 1 and 2 repectively represents the shortened and "translated" version of the verbatim dialogue presented above.
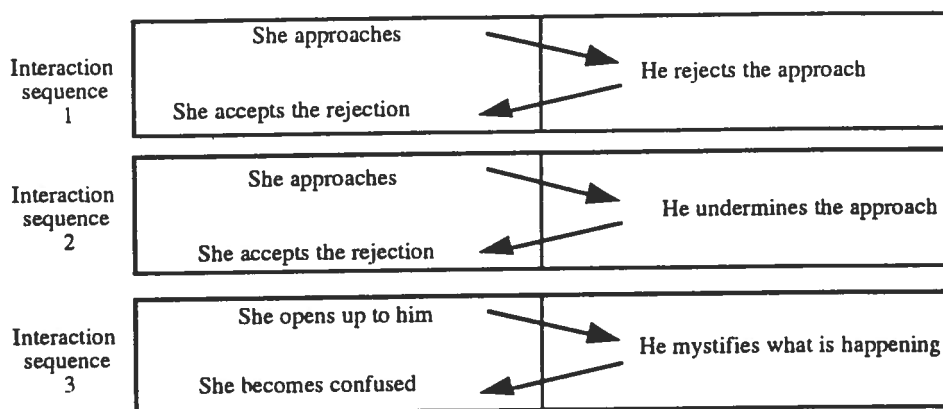

Figure 1.

Interactional Sequence Analysis. Summary descriptions for theme A:
Closeness (C) vs Distance (D) for Couple No 7-8

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[4] It would seem that the general pattern in which this particular couple related was quite similar on the two themes. And in this case we found that their stance of domination-submission was characteristic of most dialogues regardless of the theme in question. Interestingly, this pattern changed during therapy when Nan started to give up on the relationship, indicating a wish to end it. At his stage Fred began to approach her as though to preserve the balance, in other words they traded positions. The reader who may feel that Fred is a cruel, dominating man, not deserving of a wife who tries to please him, would be surprised to see that she was indeed able to be distant and condescending when he changed.
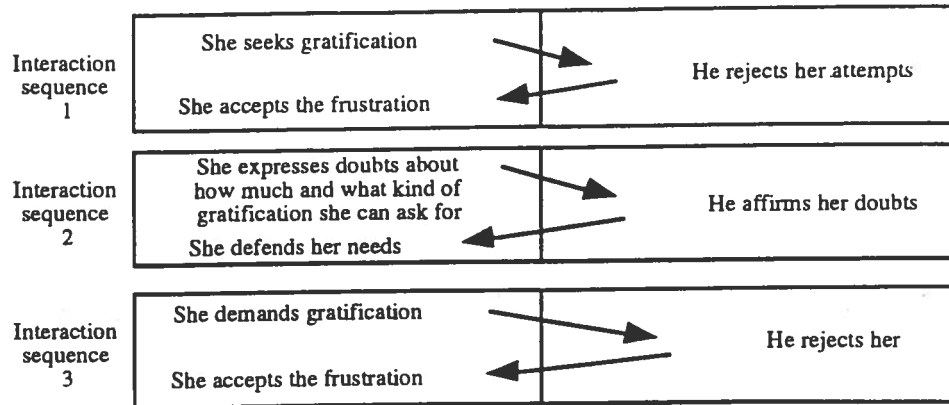
Figure 2

Interactional Sequence Analysis. Summary descriptions for theme B:
Gratification (G) vs Frustration (F) for Couple No 7-8

Flow charts

The other attempt at solving the display problems was to construct a so-called "flow chart." The idea was that such a display would revceal other aspects of the *process* as well as *quality* of the interaction.
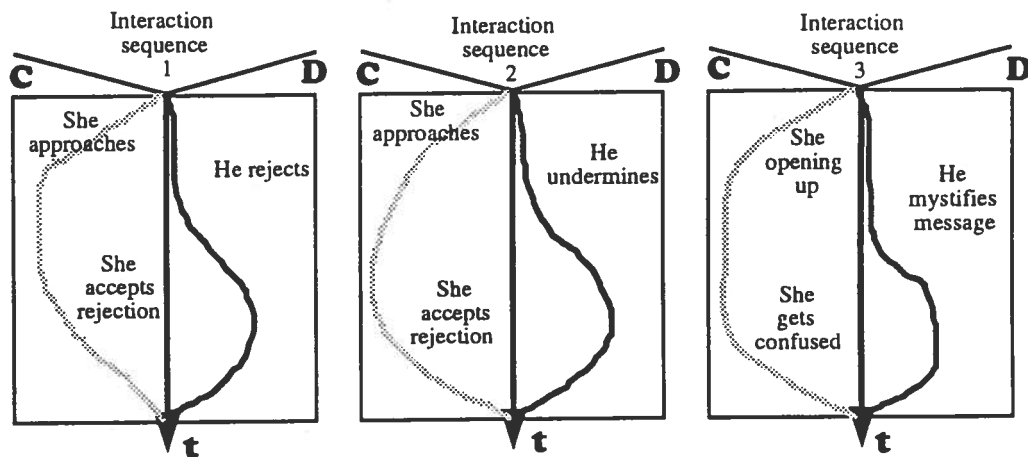

Figure 3.

Interactional Sequence Analysis. Flow Chart for theme A:
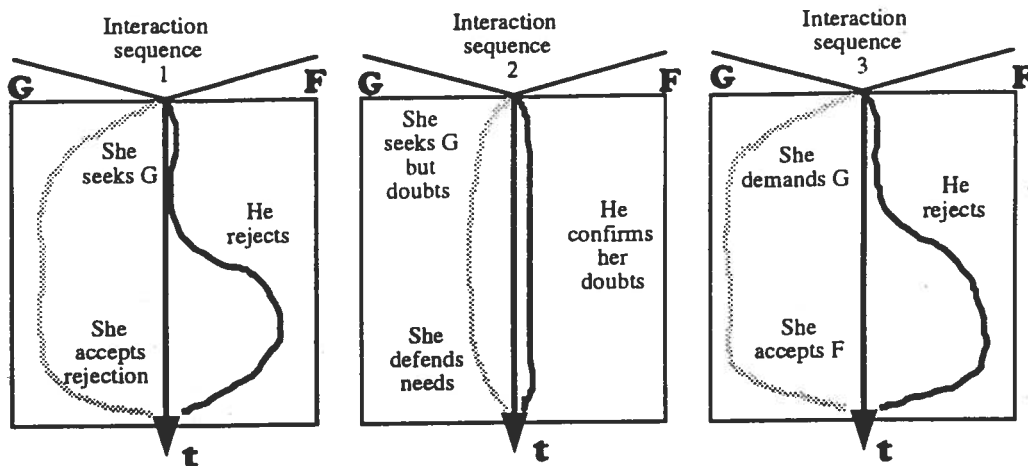Closeness (C) vs Distance (D) for Couple No 7-8

Figure 4

Interactional Sequence Analysis. Flow Chart for theme B:
Gratification (G) vs Frustration (F) for Couple No 7-8

The visual displays of the dialogues indicates whether or not the patterns are similar, i.e. repetitive both within and across sequences. The three analyses are designated as units 1, 2 and 3. The themes were indicated horizontally proceeding from closeness to distance. Between closeness and distance is a "neutral" line from which couples started their dialogue and to which they returned when the dialogue ended. As the distance seemed to increase between the partners, the "flow-line" was drawn in the outward direction from the centre or neutral line. The *degree* of distance or closeness is indicated by how far away from the centre the movement was. The "t" at the bottom refers to the time. In Figure 3, unit 1 Nan approaches, indicated by a movement toward C, away from the centre line. Fred rejected the approach and his "line" moved in the direction of distance or D. As far as Fred and Nan are concerned the flow chart shows that their interaction seems to be characterized by the same pattern, i.e. a repetitive interaction on both themes across occasions.

In Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8 corresponding analyses of couple No. 13-14 are presented in order to show different interactional patterns.
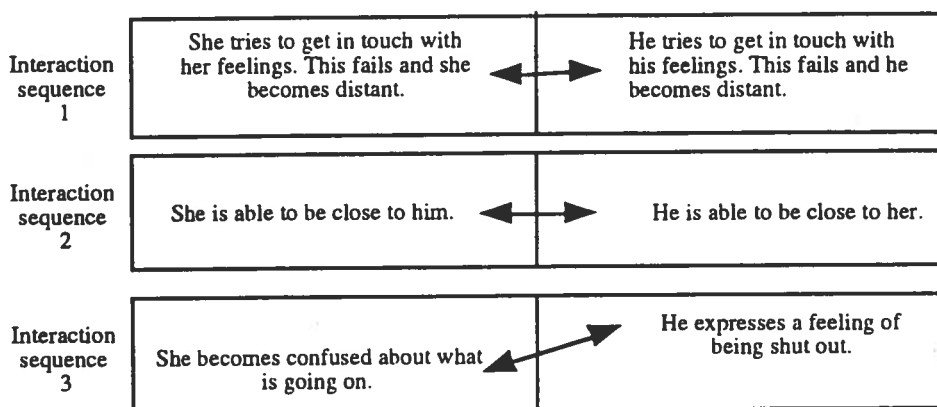

Figure 5.

Interactional Sequence Analysis. Summary descriptions for theme A:
Closeness (C) vs Distance (D) for Couple No 13-14

Figure 6
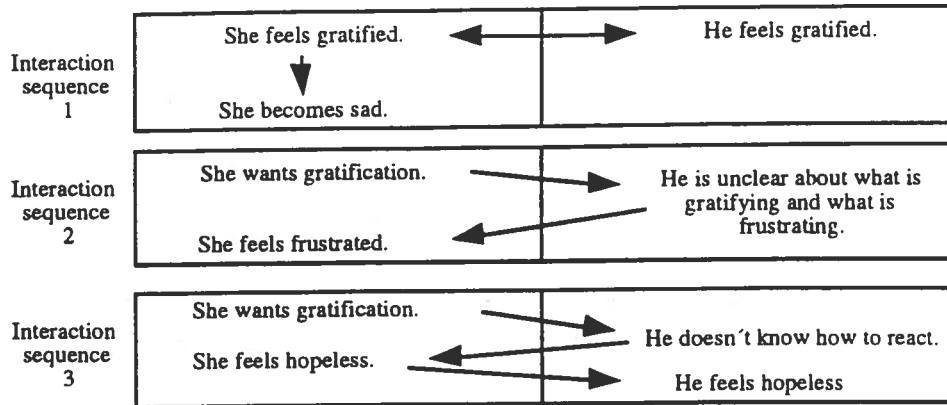
Interactional Sequence Analysis. Summary descriptions for theme B:
Gratification (G) vs Frustration (F) for Couple No 13-14
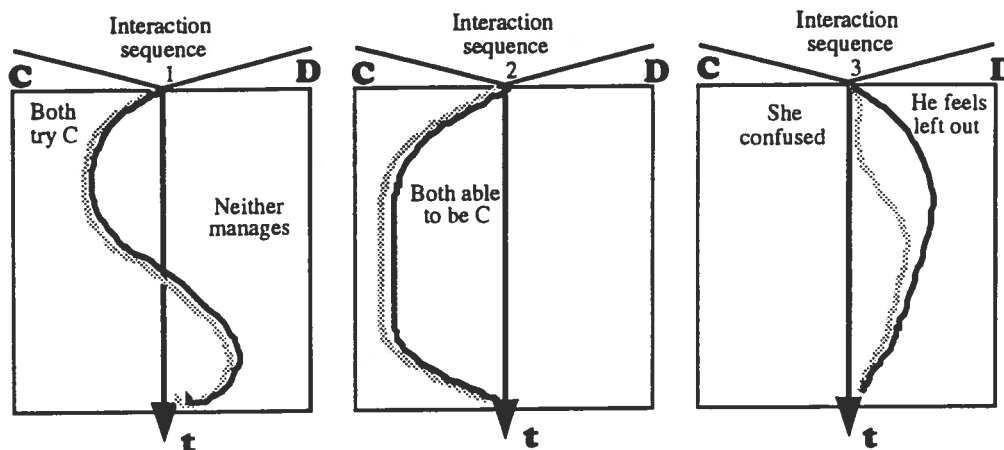

Figure 7

Interactional Sequence Analysis. Flow Chart for theme A:
Closeness (C) vs Distance (D) for Couple No 13-14
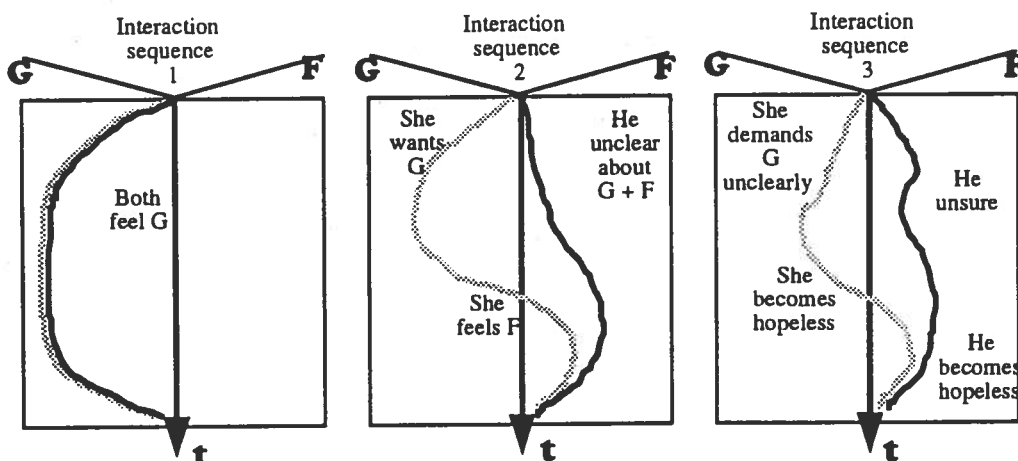

Figure 8

Interactional Sequence Analysis. Flow Chart for theme B:
Gratification (G) vs Frustration (F) for Couple No 13-14

Types of Interactional Patterns

Interactional patterns for the 15 couples on the themes of closeness/distance and gratification/frustration.

Twenty-three different patterns were identified, 10 on closeness/distance and 12 on gratification/frustration. All patterns were analyzed on the basis of verbatim verbal reports and meta-communicative messages in relation to a theme as described in the ISA-method. The below patterns are shortened versions of the complete ISA.

Initially the patterns on *closeness/distance*, subsequently the patterns on *gratification/frustration* will be presented:

Interactional patterns on closeness/distance

1. *A approaches, B distances - A seems to accept the distancing:*

   A: "I think things are going better..."
   B: "Yeah? then you must have forgotten how things were this weekend..."
   A: "Well, OK, I guess that is right actually..."

2. *Both approach, but at the same time disqualify the approach:*

   A: "I really want to have more contact, but it seems we never have any time. The children are always there, we have too much to do...Don't spend enough time at home..."
   B: "As you know... I too feel a need for more time together, right now there is so much extra with building the garage and all..."

3. *Both distance - one reacts with anger:*

   A.   "I have given up getting close to you... "
   B: "So have I... You are always pulling out of the relationship, always distant!"

4. *Both distance, but accuse each other of pulling away:*

   A: "You are just like your mother - we don't know what you feel...You always find an excuse to pull away from the family. Why don't you just admit that you are interested?"
   B: "How can I be interested? or show interest? You're never at home... You always have thousand commitments. Everybody says that they never find you at home..."

5. *Both pull away from the other:*

   A: "I give up..."
   B: "Me too..."

6. *A approaches, but in a passive way. B approaches actively, but becomes unclear and diverts attention from theme:*

   A: "It should be possible to have more time together...Other couples do..."
   B: "Anyway... No matter what ...I need more of a married life than I have right now...I am fed up with the way things are... Even you sister is beginning to react..."
   A: "You know I have a lot to think about."

7. *A approaches, B distances:*

> A. "I have the feeling than things are easier at home. We are more open..."
> B: "I really wonder what you mean by more open..."
> A: "You aren't even willing to look at the positive side..."

8. *A approaches, but in a vague and unclear or indirect way. B is distant:*

> A: "You know how I just love music... it really is rather sad that you don't share that interest...It enriches one's life."
> B: "You knew that that I didn't particularly care about music when you married me..."

9. *Both are vague and unclear about theme:*

> A: "It often happens in the course of things that I seem to end up alone many evenings..."
> B: "Yes, I often think... maybe it had been better if we worked together... Like Pete and Joan... But from what I hear, that is too much of a good thing!"

10. *Both approach, and can be close:*

> A: "You know I want to cooperate with you. It should be us and our family now.
> B: "Yes, and I know how torn you feel sometimes...between them and and me."
> A: "Yes but I really want it to be just us. That's what we will work for..."

Interactional patterns on gratification / frustration

1. *A seeks gratification. B rejects A and A becomes frustrated:*

> A: "I feel I need a bit more attention from you..."
> B: "I have tried - it is impossible to satisfy you!"
> A: "That is just a stupid excuse..."

2. *A seeks gratification in an unclear way. B becomes frustrated and A becomes angry:*

> A: "Well, it seems that I very often find myself alone looking after the kids..."
> B: "I feel like I am trying to do my share, but you won't let me..."
> A: "That's crazy! I sure haven't noticed much effort on your part".

3. *A seeks gratification in an unclear manner. B becomes frustrated:*

> A: "This weekend I had to do everything around the house... Of course I enjoy it. I really like to work for a happier family life... But then I think: Does anyone think of me?"
> B: "I feel that I do my share of the work around the house all the time... I just do different things...I really find it hard that all I do goes unnoticed..."

4. *A expresses frustration in an aggressive way. B feels frustrated:*

> A: "I think you are really mean when you don't consider my feelings at all!"
> B: "If we are going to talk about consideration, I think you have a lot to answer for... I feel like I am the one who tries to be considerate!"

5. *Both express frustration in a passive manner:*

> A: "What is so difficult is that we get stuck like this, and don't seem to find room for our own

> things in the relationship..."

    B: "Yes, that is right... and you are so used to doing things without letting me know, so I end up doing the daily chores around the house..."

6. Both express frustration in angry ways:

    A: "You are always yelling and demanding that we do everything to suit you. You are really insensitive..."

    B: "I can't believe you are saying that. You do nothing for me..."

7. Both try to gratify the other, but at the same time they disqualify the attempt:

    A: "I see that you need some peace and quiet when you get home. But the apartment is small. The kids are there. And they have to be there, naturally..."

    B: "I know...really I do...really...you have way too much to do with those kids as well. There does not seem to be any solution at this point..."

8. A tries to gratify. B answers in a confused way. A becomes confused:

    A: "I really want to please you...I mean I have really tried...Taken you out a lot to plays and stuff..."

    B: "But...and I do see it...it so happens that i see that...But then I think: are you doing it for me? Obviously, you do these things as much for yourself... But then these things obviously go together. It is hard to separate out..."

    A: "OK...So I don't mean to say I don't like the theatre...But, I don't know...It is true that I want to more at certain times than others..."

9 . Both seek gratification in an unclear manner, and both become frustrated in an unclear manner:

    A: "Ok...You like go fishing for your vacation. I like to go abroad...to travel..."

    B: "So do I..."

    A: "Yes...You say that and sometimes we go. But I always go fishing with you...like last summer. But it is ...I don't enjoy it that much...at least not the way I used to...now I feel that..."

    B: "No, I don't either..."

10. A demands gratification. B seeks gratification, but rather passively. Both become frustrated:

    A: "I feel that I have made it perfectly clear all along that I will take my holiday during hunting season. You must accept that. It is something I need..."

    B: "And you have been hunting every year too...What I mean is that you...or we should have a longer holiday if you cut out hunting for once...Of course I could go down to the islands by myself...but you were the one who said we ought to go together..."

11. A seeks gratification. B tries to gratify, but in an unclear way. A becomes confused:

    A: "You might have told me what was on you mind...What you are thinking...That you did not like Ellen to go to them. That would have made it easier for me..."

    B: "I did indicate how I felt...But you said you'd rather...that was before I was even in the picture...and you had control over their relationship to Ellen. I respected that..."

    A: "But you didn't say anything...I no...I don't know. It is all so confusing..."

12. A tries to gratify, but in an aggressive manner. B becomes aggressive:

    A: "I have told you a million times that I'll look after the kids on weekends. But it is never enough. And never good enough... Your demands are impossible..."

    B: "I can't even remember that you said it... Only last weekend you had so much work..."

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Is it Possible to Identify Specific Interpersonal Patterns?

The interactions between all 15 partners on 3 occasions and in relation to two themes showed, contrary to our expectation, not one overarching, repetitive pattern. Instead we identified *three* patterns. One interactional mode was labelled complementary or reciprocal. This is the one where f. exam. one partner is submissive, the other dominating, one approaching, one distancing etc. In the reciprocal interaction partners "split the theme in two", i.e. *the partners expressed opposing sides of the theme.*

A second interactional sequence was symmetrical. In this case the partners seemed to share a position, for example, *both* indicated that they wanted closeness, then *both* seemed to undermine possibilities for closeness. The partners shared both sides together, for example, *both expressed a need for closeness and both joined in undermining the possibilities to satisfy this need.*

A third mode was characterized by a move from one type of interaction to another, in other words a *mixed* pattern emerged. Below an interactional pattern shows how the interaction moves from a symmetrical to a complementary mode:

A: "We have to talk about these problems, that's for sure..."
B: "Yes, I totally agree. The ability to talk things over is very important in a marriage. We should make time to do so." (symmetrical mode).
A: "My problem is that there is so little time...The job is so demanding, and I do a lot more of the chores than you do..."
B: "I don't agree. You have to remember that I work more hours than you do..." (complementary mode).

Bateson, (1958) observing tribal group behaviour, noted two interactional patterns between tribes which he labelled "symmetrical schizomogenesis" and "complimentary schizomogenesis". Building on Bateson, Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson (1967) introduced the concepts of meta-complementary dyadic patterns in which one person would allow or force the other to be in charge of him or her. In this description we recognize the balanced or complementary interactional patterns revealed in the present study. As far as the meta-symmetrical pattern is concerned these authors described a relationship in which one partner would be "allowing or forcing the other to be equal to him or her." (p. 277). In our couples the symmetrical pattern is similar in the sense that both partners *joined* in expressing both sides of an issue, for example, *both* wanted more time for each other, and both agreed that such time could not be had at this time. Lederer & Jackson (1968/1990) emphasized the fact that this pattern revealed partners who were engaged in an ongoing struggle to compete: to be as good as, as smart as, have as many rights as etc. "Control in order to be as good as the partner" is focused. Observing at our level of analysis this type of control seems to be less of an issue. Rather the partners struggled to regulate the relationship in various ways in order to avoid pain, paralleling the infant's attempt to regulate the caretaker so as to reduce uncomfortable tension. (Stern, 1985). The consciously experienced suffering that resulted from these efforts such as feelings of being stuck, frustrated and isolated etc. seemed less devastating than the threat involved in confronting the underlying, unarticulated pain.

Regarding the reciprocal or what Jackson & Lederer called the complementary dyad the similarities are more striking. Their interpretation of this pattern is that one partner is in control in the sense of being in charge of, or dominating the other. In our data control was one of many aspects of reciprocal interaction. The function of the interactional pattern can be interpreted as a way to secure survival of the self *while* preserving the needed relationship. (Schibbye, 1986).

The patterns observed by Lederer & Jackson, (1968/1990) as well as those identified in the present study are in accordance with the extensive research on marital choice involving the question of whether a partner chooses a partner who is similar (homogeneous choice) or different (heterogeneous choice). These studies show that about 50% of the choices are homogeneous (Heider, 1958, Newcomb 1961, Berscheid & Walster, 1969) and about 50 % heterogeneous (Winch, 1958, Mittelman, 1944, 1948, Meissner, 1978). These "patterns of choice" are strikingly similar to the symmetrical ("alike") and reciprocal ("different") patterns of interaction. Combining these various findings one might speculate that these patterns are forged by properties of the dyad. Partners are either in agreement or in opposition, similar or different. There is a corresponding "feel" in the "frozen" subject-object positions in some dyads. (Benjamin, 1988, Schibbye, 1993) In such dyads partners seem to be forced into reciprocal positions of being either subject or object (I-you, you-me), or a symmetric pattern having the positions of subjects or objects to *others* (we-them, they-us).

Is it Possible to Identify Repetitive Patterns?

Our initial hypothesis was that we would find repetitive interaction, i.e. similar patterns in relation to both themes across all occasions. Figure 9 reveals a different result:

Similarities of patterns across three sequences:
Closeness/distance: 6 couples.
Gratification/frustration: 2 couples.

Similarities of patterns across two of three sequences:
Closeness/distance: 2 couples
Gratification/frustration: 5 couples

Similarity when two and three sequences are combined:
Closeness/distance: 9 couples
Gratification/frustration: 7 couples

Variability across all occasion or on all sequences:
Closeness/distance   7 couples
Gratification/frustration   7 couples

Figure 9
Pattern-similarity and pattern-difference for all couples across all interactional sequence analyses.

Figure 9 shows that there was no consistent interactional tendency in relation to either theme across occasions for the group as a whole. The interactions were characterized by repetition for about a half of the couples and variation for the other half. The conclusion is that the expected repetition described by Freud and others and articulated by clients was not identified in the study.

Caution must be excercised as far as rejecting the Freudian notion of repetition as well as the well-known assumption held by therapists that people recreate their childhood scenarios and repeat "the play" not only in transference, but in their partner and family relationships. The level of analysis chosen may be important. In our study the focus was on micro-aspects of the dialogue, not on a macro-analysis involving a larger couple scenario. It is not unlikely that the dialogue at our level of observation form subordinate aspects which are encompassed in the more holistic network of interactional styles or even in positions described in the behaviour profiles of couples.

Is it Possible to Identify Relational Defences in the Data?

Given our theoretical point of departure repetetive interaction would indicate defensive action. We are left with a puzzling problem. Relational defenses resulting in repetition could not be documented. Our puzzlement was not reduced until we changed the question from: "Do couples repeat the *same* interactional pattern?" to: "What are the *functions* of the particular types of interaction the study revealed?" Characteristically the couples rarely met each others alleged needs nor they did get what they in one way or another seemed to be asking for. They appeared to return to the "neutral line" without neither having been able to get close nor to gratify each other, thus avoiding satisfaction and thus changes in the relationship. The partners were stuck in the sense that they were unable to change themselves and the relationship. What was repeated then was not a specific pattern. Rather they displayed various patterns which had that in common that *they kept the couple in a position of status quo*. In other words they displayed *a variety of interactional patterns, apparently designed to avoid change*. They kept "helping" each other, both to keep issues alive, as well as preventing the possibility of getting what they wanted. And they had several ways of managing this. Looking at the interactions in this light the stuck, repetitive quality experienced by both partners and therapists would seem to reflect ongoing, but varied efforts at avoiding change. What Freud observed in repetition compulsion then, may well have been "the repetition of no change"

The maintenance of "sameness" or rather of no change can have a defensive function. The partners defended against the anxiety and pain associated with the annihilation of the self and the relationship by avoiding a threatening change. They created mutual predispositions for each others' feelings and actions, i.e. regulated each other in such a was as to keep their selves and their relationship "safe" no matter how painful they experienced the interaction at a conscious level. In this sense our findings fits in with Freud's notion that the function of maintaining "sameness" is both to defend against and to "remember". They avoided dealing with the psychic material, but kept the dilemmas "alive". There was an effort at focusing the problem, but at the same time to defend against solving it.

The child develops a relationship with early significant others in which strategic relational patterns are developed to insure both a sense of self and to safeguard the attachment. Partner interaction in adulthood reflects the relational styles the individuals developed in childhood to preserve a sense of self, i.e. to avoid the annihilation of the self. (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1969). This is in line with Freud's view that the patient is "obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of... *remembering it as something belonging to the past*". (1914, p. 18). The emotional conflict or deficit involved in the self and the relationship continue to exert pressure toward expression and reconciliation, even as it is warded off.

The defensive aspects of the communications were also revealed in the evasiveness, mystifications, vagueness and striking lack of clarity which characterized the dialogues. The lack of clarity makes it possible to remain irresponsible in the sense that the sender may change or deny the content of a message. Meta-communication may serve a defensive purpose. The partners "disowned" meta-messages whenever the partner's response to it would be perceived as threatening. If the meta-message is "I am angry", the sender can deny the anger. The receiver may be unable to interpret and react adequately, and support the partner's alleged lack of angry feelings. The sender and often the receiver as well are *unaware* of or *unreflected* with regard to the anger.

In this case both are involved in the process of denying anger. We might say that denial in this case becomes a "relational defence".

Do Partners Conspire to Maintain a Dysfunctional Interaction?

The couples *cooperate in defending both for themselves and for the partner*. In accordance with various regulatory schemes they conspired to either "place" aspects of their selves in the other, and to serve as containers for some of these aspects. In this sense they deal with problems in the "partner-self" either by dividing it horizontally (complementary interaction) and "live out" opposing sides, or dividing the partner-self vertically (symmetric interaction), both sharing both aspects. In either case they are undifferentiated and therefore unreflected in regard to *how* they deal with painful affect. This merging of selves is assumed to stem from a lack of differentiation possibilities in the early mother-child relationships which was described on page 6.

A lack of differentiation involves "living in the other" and/or "letting the other live in one's own self" as well as an inability to be aware or to reflect on his process. The couples' conspiration to avoid change or movement is understood as a way of controlling the "relational unconscious". Freud showed how unconscious material was *transformed* into symptoms in the individual patient. Correspondingly, partners transform unacceptable experiences in themselves into characteristics, mostly negative ones, in the partner. A husband may for example accuse his wife of being dominating rather than admit to his own feelings of weakness.

It should be pointed out that as with individuals, partners have "conflict-" or "problem-free" areas, and many aspects of the relationship may be experienced as satisfying.

Additional Findings

Viewing the data as a whole the theme of closeness/distance emerges as an "over-arching" theme. The partners indicate that they *want* closeness while they conspire to *avoid* it. Findings involving the fundamental importance of the regulation of closeness-distance in early infant-mother interaction are in accordance with this conclusion. (Stern, 1985, Beebe & Lachmann, 1988, Roed Hansen, 1991). The need for the relationship, for the other person, for attachment was pointed out early by people like Fairbairn, 1952, Sullivan 1953, Wynne 1968, Bowlby 1969, 1988. On the other hand the need to develop and maintain a differentiated self is fundamental for the child. (Mahler, 1975, Stierlin, 1974). Seeking closeness in one way or other may be thought of as maintaining the optimal attachment or the optimal relationship. Distancing may be an effort to maintain optimal self boundaries and preserve the self. The conspirational efforts to avoid and at the same time signal the need for closeness and/or gratification may reflect problems in relation to the complex dialectic involved in balancing these basic dual needs.

In our observations we noted that the partners had problems focusing on their own experience. Thus it was rare to hear one of them say "I feel" in a genuine or congruent way. Rather they would say "You are.." or "You think..". Wile (1993) made similar observations. Instead of clarifying their own needs they expressed these indirectly, most often as a complaint about the partners. This inevitably led to rejection which was presicely the opposite of what they basically might want. Or as was noted above, when trying to contact and communicate about needs that make them vulnerable, the messages tended to be unclear, making a gratifying response close to impossible. When you ask for closeness in an angry, demanding way, you are creating predispostions for the other to respond negatively, thereby avoiding a threatening closeness, most likely on behalf of, not only yourself, but your partner.

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