



# What to Do When In Couple Therapy?

## Linking Therapist Behavior With Generic Principles

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### INTRODUCTION

**Generic Principles** (s. box on the right) are common factors in all kinds of therapies to describe conditions for self-organized order-order-transitions. Little is known about which therapeutic interventions seem useful at different points in therapy and how to choose the right moment for those (“Kairos”). In this study we link questions and statements of the therapist with the Generic Principles on the basis of a single case. The objective is to investigate,

- if therapist behavior can be described with Generic Principles
- if yes, which Generic Principles can be revealed at which point of time during therapy (and during each session)
- what the therapist does to stress stability & change.

#### Generic Principles in detail (Haken & Schiepek, 2006)

- GP 1: Creating Conditions of Stability
- GP 2: Identifying Patterns of the Relevant System
- GP 3: Sense-Making of Change Process/ Coherence
- GP 4: Identifying Control Parameters / Enabling Energization (in relation to goals of the client)
- GP 5: De-Stabilization
- GP 6: Resonance / Synchronization / Kairos (coordinate interventions and rhythmicity of the client)
- GP 7: Enabling Symmetry Breaking
- GP 8: Re-Stabilization

### METHOD

We built a differentiated coding system (Fornaro & French, 2009) to code and categorize all questions and statements of the therapist (in this case **2967 expressions** within 7 sessions) during a successful systemic couple therapy of “couple 2”. By means of two-step-cluster-analyses and on the basis of relevant categories, the expressions were grouped into clusters.

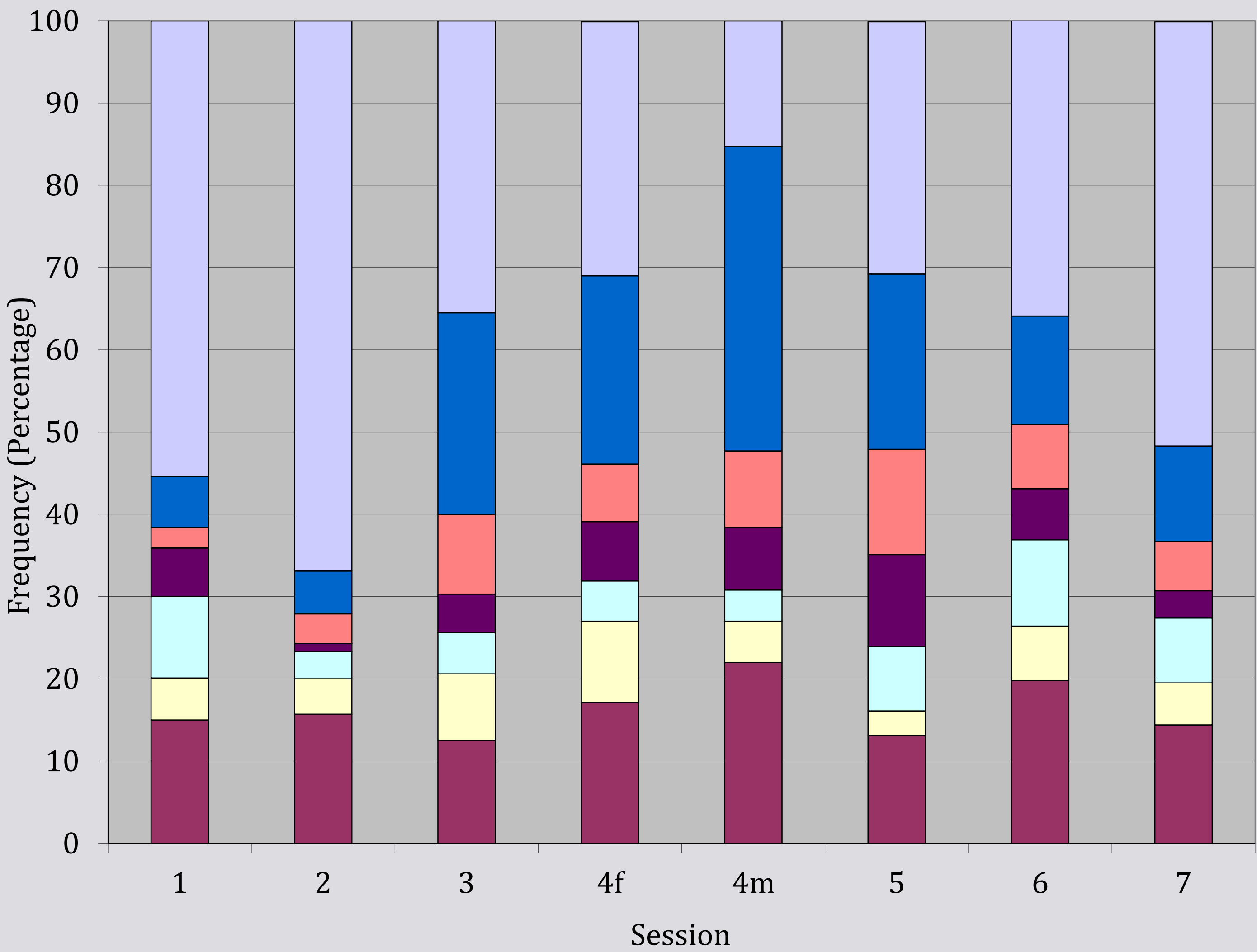
In a second step the importance of different generic principles over time was analyzed (cross tabs, chi-squared test).

### RESULTS

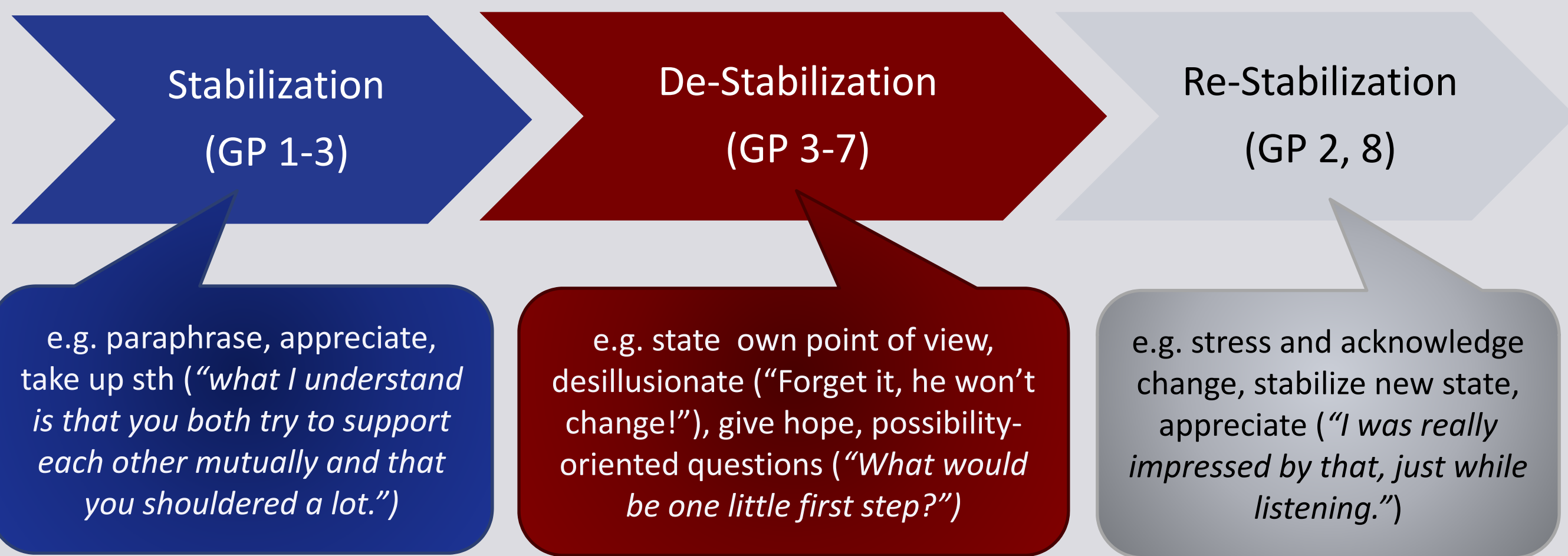
- The best model-fit was achieved by identifying **7 different clusters**. In terms of content 6 of them easily could be linked with Generic Principles. Only Cluster 2 “Commenting Questions” couldn’t be classified immediately. To see the linkage clearly, the other clusters were named by the corresponding Generic Principle.
- There were significant differences in the distribution of clusters in those 7 sessions ( $\chi^2(42) = 519.72, p < .01$ ), so it reveals that different **Generic Principles** have a **varying meaning throughout therapy**. While “Stabilization and Identifying Patterns” are most central in the initial phase of therapy, “De-Stabilization” apparently is more relevant in the middle. “Energizing” turns out to be important from the beginning on, whereas (Re-)“Stabilization and Identifying Patterns” becomes meaningful at the end (s. graphics). The chronological pattern of these principles as well emerges on the microlevel in every single session, which shows the **fractal characteristic** of selforganizing systems.
- The chronological pattern of these principles can be interpreted as a **sequence of Stabilization → De-Stabilization → Re-Stabilization**. As one can see in the speech bubbles underneath the model, the therapist uses different techniques to create stability and change in different phases of therapy. Interestingly, destabilizing, **confrontative therapeutic statements** noticeably often were **addressed to the couple**, not to the individuals.

Couple 2: two-step-cluster-analysis of therapist behavior

- Stabilization (Questions) and Identifying Patterns (39.2 %)
- De-Stabilization (Statements) (18.7 %)
- De-Stabilization (Questions) (7.5 %)
- Energizing “Future”/ Changeability (6.1 %)
- Energizing “Past” (6.3 %)
- Commenting Questions (6.0 %)
- Stabilization (Statements) (16.2 % in total)



Initial Phase (Session 1 + 2) | Therapy Phase (Session 3 – 7)



### DISCUSSION

By using data of unique density it was possible to put almost 3000 questions and statements during one systemic couple therapy under the microscope. With this new methodological framework for understanding change (Ulrich, 2012), the present study was able to show that **therapeutic interventions can be linked with theoretical conditions for order-order-transitions**. The cluster “Commenting Questions” couldn’t be classified within the GPs. This may be due to standing outside the proposed model or a specific therapist effect.

The results also prove, that **the importance of different Generic Principles varies throughout a therapy course**.

As a consequence, the Generic Principles seem practically highly relevant and its chronological pattern can be used by the therapist as a “process guide” of how to create conditions for change (“Kairos”).

Specifically, **differentiating between the couple and the individual system** when using destabilizing techniques may be **meaningful for successful couple therapy**: confronting the couple while acknowledging both individuals helps to let go of destructive behavior and look for possibilities to change.

### REFERENCES

- Fornaro, Patrick & French, Cecily (2008). *Manual zur Klassifikation von Therapeutenäußerungen in der systemischen Paartherapie*. Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München.
- Haken, Hermann & Schiepek, Günter (2006). *Synergetik in der Psychologie. Selbstorganisation verstehen und gestalten*. Göttingen: Hogrefe.
- Ulrich, Cornelia (2012). *Paartherapie-Prozessforschung. Entwicklung und Anwendung einer innovativen Forschungsstrategie*. Hamburg: Dr. Kovač Verlag.