

**SOFTENING: A CRUCIAL TURNING
POINT IN COUPLES THERAPY**

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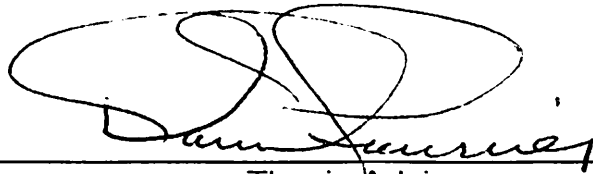
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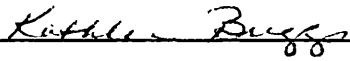
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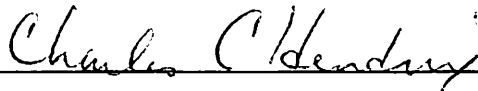


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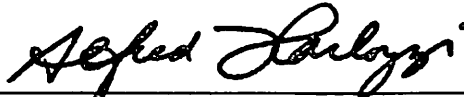
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PREFACE

Through process research, researchers in the field of marriage and family therapy continue to explore the change process in couples therapy. Identifying components of the change process provides insight for researchers and clinicians providing services for couples who are experiencing relationship difficulties. As clinicians and researchers seek to gain insight into change processes in therapy, identifying key turning points that occur in therapy may provide increased understanding regarding what contributes to the change process. Softening is a phenomenon that has been proposed to be a key turning point in couples therapy. If softening is proposed to be a turning point contributing to the process of change, identifying indicators of softening that have occurred in couples therapy can contribute to clinicians' and researchers' understanding of the change process. The purpose of the current study is to contribute to the preliminary groundwork needed for the operationalization of softening in an exploratory study. This study seeks to identify indicators of softening through a case study of session summaries recorded for successful couples therapy.

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Couples seek marital therapy for a variety of reasons. Commonly, one or both partners are not satisfied in the marital relationship and seek therapeutic services to increase satisfaction. Many couples become stuck in negative interactional cycles that decrease satisfaction. These couples often desire a change. Part of a therapist's task is to help the couple identify their negative cycle and assist the couple to alter that cycle. This process requires that at least one partner become less reactive or defensive as the couple invests in creating and enacting a new, more positive cycle. Therapy is a process that contains crucial moments that contribute to successful outcomes. Identifying the components of the change process that are considered to be crucial turning points in therapy is imperative. In addition, knowing when a partner is able to become less reactive and begins to let down his or her defenses is tremendously important to observe and understand.

Research Problem

Few research studies have been conducted on change processes in couples therapy (Helmeke & Sprenkle, 2000). Process research can lead to insight into how change occurs when couples participate in couples therapy. “Process research ultimately becomes the study of mechanisms of change” (Greenberg & Pinsof, 1986, p. 5). Johnson and Greenberg (1988) affirm that focusing on the process of change is necessary to be able to explain how a particular set of interventions facilitates change. As clinicians and researchers seek to gain insight into change processes in therapy, identifying key turning points that occur in therapy may provide increased understanding regarding what contributes to the change process. Research addressing turning points throughout therapy focuses on a type of change that occurs in the therapeutic process. In their recent process-oriented study of couples therapy, Helmeke and Sprenkle (2000) focused on a specific aspect of the change process, pivotal moments in couples therapy, rather than on more general aspects of change in therapy, such as what was helpful about therapy.

“Softening” is a potential turning point that has been suggested to be a part of the change process in couples therapy. Softening has been loosely defined in the field of marriage and family therapy (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988; Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg & Schindler, 1999; Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998). Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is one model of couples therapy that has specifically used the term “softening” to describe a change event that can occur in couples therapy. EFT literature is unclear as to whether softening is a

specific turning point in therapy, an event, or a process. In a study intended to relate process research to outcome research, softening was described as a shift from negative interaction toward increased accessibility and responsiveness by a partner (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988). Another study focusing on the status and challenges of EFT, described softening as a time when a previously critical partner expresses vulnerability and asks for comfort and connection from his/her partner (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg & Schindler, 1999). Finally, a study focusing on EFT treatment of couples dealing with trauma delineated softening as an event by suggesting that softening occurs when a hostile or pursuing partner accesses attachment needs or fears and asks for them to be met in a vulnerable manner, an event that can redefine the bond between partners (Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998).

EFT has addressed therapeutic processes of change theoretically and empirically. EFT is currently the second most validated form of marital therapy after the behavioral approaches (Johnson & Talitman, 1997). Softening is one event that is viewed as highly predictive of change in EFT (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988). In fact, the occurrence of softening is a significant part of successful EFT. In a study conducted by Johnson and Greenberg (1988), softening was found to occur in the “best” sessions in successful EFT. Conversely, softening was absent in the processes of unsuccessful couples (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988). Successful sessions in EFT are described by the researchers as having a greater depth of experience and interaction in conflict episodes and by the “softening” of the blamer (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988).

Thus, softening has become a crucial therapeutic goal for therapists who utilize an emotionally focused approach. Although softening is noted as one of the most significant elements of successful EFT, there are few research studies and publications that have directly addressed this concept. If softening is proposed to be a turning point contributing to the process of change, identifying indicators of softening that have occurred in couples therapy can contribute to clinicians' and researchers' understanding of the change process.

Functional Family Therapy (FFT) also refers to a concept related to ideas on softening. Alexander and Parsons (1982) describe a series of techniques utilized in the FFT approach developed to "facilitate the transition from skepticism, defensiveness, and resentment to hope and enthusiasm" (p.58). This shift from defensiveness and resentment to hope and enthusiasm seems to be describing a type of softening or transition during therapy.

Crucial turning points in therapy are often marked contributors to second order change. When an organizational change in the system occurs so that the former system ceases to exist and a new system with different patterns replaces it, a second order change is said to have occurred (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). Softening can also be thought of as second-order change; that is, a shift from a prior worldview (perspective influencing beliefs) to a qualitatively different way of interpreting and responding to events. The interactional process of the couple is reorganized, replacing the negative interactional cycle. Softening is one example of a second order change that can occur in couples therapy as each partner becomes less reactive, defensive, and intent on protecting his or her

vulnerabilities. This leads to a shift in perspective allowing the possibility for the creation of a new interaction cycle.

Purpose

The purpose of the current study is to contribute to the preliminary groundwork needed for the operationalization of softening in an exploratory study. If softening is one of many crucial turning points that are a part of the change process in couples therapy, clinicians and researchers need more information about the factors associated with recognizing and understanding its role. Knowing the antecedent conditions and which specific marital behaviors are associated with softening is an important need in the Marriage and Family Therapy field.

Questions to Be Addressed

Therapeutic processes include pivotal moments in therapy. The crucial turning points experienced by clients are predictors of therapeutic outcome. Softening seems to be a component of the change process in couples therapy, is it also a turning point in therapy? What behaviors exhibited by partners in couple relationships during the therapeutic process are indicators of the concept referred to as softening? Is there a link between a reduction in partner defensiveness and an increase in softening behaviors? Is the occurrence of softening as a pivotal turning point in couples therapy a necessary precursor to the alteration of a negative interactional cycle and enactment of a positive interactional cycle?

Conceptual Framework

Exploring turning points in therapy, such as softening, can provide greater understanding of the change process that occurs in therapy. Linking turning points that occur in session back to theory is vital as researchers and clinicians gain insight into the therapeutic process. General Systems Theory and the INSIGHT Model are two theoretical frameworks that provide a foundation for understanding and describing the concept of softening. In addition to these theories, the concept of second-order change provides a useful framework for exploring the notion of softening.

General Systems Theory

Family therapy pioneers were largely influenced by the meta-theory, General Systems Theory (GST). Although some theorists have challenged the view that GST is the best way to approach family therapy, the majority of family therapists consider themselves to be system thinkers (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). GST provides a framework for understanding the treatment of couple conflict by addressing couples' interactional cycles and how negative interactional patterns can be altered. A system is defined as "a collection of interrelated components and the existing relationships between these components" (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988, p. 187). As therapists work with family systems, they must look at the family system as a whole in addition to the way the family members interact. Looking at the existing relationships between family members, such as the marital couple, is crucial when intervening with couples who are unable to resolve conflict effectively and become stuck in a

negative interaction cycle. Wholeness, feedback loops, circular causality, and punctuation are four core concepts of GST that provide insight into understanding interactional cycles.

Wholeness is a foundational concept used in understanding a system. “The whole is greater than the sum of the parts” (Whitechurch & Constantine, 1993, p. 328) is a definition widely used throughout systems literature to describe a key characteristic of a system that emphasizes the necessity of looking beyond the individual parts of a system. The focus shifts from looking at just individual parts to also evaluating the way the parts are connected, how the parts interact, and the rules that govern these interactions. “A system is more than an aggregate of its parts for the reason that when parts combine they produce a unified whole with characteristics that cannot be found in the components of separate units” (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988, p.182). Each partner in a couple system interacts in such a way that creates a unified whole: the couple system. Parts of a system (each partner) can only be understood in the context of the whole (the couple system), and changes in any part of the system affect every other part as well as the whole (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988).

A second key concept highlighted by systems theorists, is the concept of feedback. Feedback is information about a system’s performance (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988) relative to the system’s external environment and the relationship among the system’s parts (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). Feedback loops are the process by which the system utilizes the information in an effort to maintain a steady state or move forward toward a goal. Feedback loops can be either

positive or negative. The effect the feedback has on the system determines whether the feedback loop is positive or negative. A negative feedback loop is a way of handling the feedback a system gets so that the information is minimized and the organization of the system is not affected. A positive feedback loop is the process in which the change in the system is amplified and the amplification tends toward systemic organizational change (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). A positive feedback loop occurs when a couple system is able to change the way in which the system's members interact after the couple system receives new information. The occurrence of softening may be a contributor to the change process if the feedback loop is positive and the information elicited by softening is used to create change within the couple system. Feedback processes can be understood by viewing couple interactions in circular terms rather than linear terms.

The third key concept in GST is the notion of circular causality. Systems theorist Gregory Bateson introduced a conceptual shift in family systems from thinking in linear causality terms to circular causality as a result of his interest in the feedback processes of systems (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). Linear causality suggests that one behavior causes another behavior. Circular causality describes a process in which each behavior is linked in a circular chain to other behaviors and events and these interactions form consistent recurring patterns over time (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). When a couple presents in therapy their dissatisfaction with how they resolve conflict, the couple's negative interactional cycle can be used to describe how their behaviors occur in a circular

causal pattern. For example, when using an interactional cycle to describe a couple's interactional process, the cycle can begin at any point. There is no beginning or end to the cycle. One partner's behavior reinforces the other partner's behavior, but does not cause that partner's behavior. "These patterns are established and maintained by the partner's actions, and the therapist is concerned with the effects of what each partner does and how these behaviors function to maintain the cycle (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988, p.33).

The fourth and final core concept in GST is the concept of punctuation. Communication and interactional patterns can be punctuated in various ways. Punctuation is a systemic concept that "organizes behavioral events and reflects the bias of the observer" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001, p.70). For example, an observer may describe a couple's interactional sequence as a pursuer-distancer pattern in which each partner's behaviors reinforce the other's behaviors. The same interactional pattern might be punctuated by the husband and wife in a more linear way. The husband may describe his distancing behaviors as caused by his wife's consistent pursuing behaviors. The wife may report that because her husband is so distant, he causes her to pursue him more. Both of these descriptions are punctuated linearly, with one partner causing the other's behavior. "An outside observer may hear a dialogue as an uninterrupted flow of communication, but each of the participants may believe that what he or she says is caused by what the other says" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001, p.70). Change is unlikely to occur as long as couples punctuate their interactions in a linear way (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). In effect, each partner waits for the other

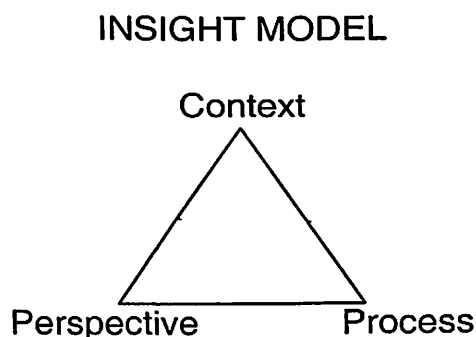
to change. When describing the change process, each partner's contributions are often punctuated in linear terms in an effort to break down complex interactions into smaller components. However, researchers must also examine couple interaction as a pattern that illustrates how partners mutually influence the change process.

INSIGHT Model

The INSIGHT Model (Hendrix, Briggs, & Fournier, 1999; Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003) is an integrative model for marriage and family therapists that provides a guide for clinicians as they gather information and identify interventions when collaborating with clients to set goals and facilitate change. The title, "INSIGHT," is an acronym that stands for "INtegration of Systemic Information for Goal-setting and Hypothesis Testing" (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003, p.1). Information gathering begins before the client steps into a therapist's office. From the moment a therapist receives an intake or referral for a client there is information the therapist must make sense of as they begin planning and hypothesizing. The clinician who uses this model is able to sift through all available information regarding a case and make decisions that fit with contextual and process-oriented aspects of the case as well as their clients' perspectives.

The INSIGHT Model integrates several prominent models of marriage and family therapy. "The Model is comprehensive and compatible with a variety of theoretical perspectives and promotes integration by providing systemic contexts for understanding observed behavior" (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003, p. 2).

Because the INSIGHT Model views the therapeutic process systemically, a triangle is used to represent the therapeutic process. By using a triangular depiction, the therapist who utilizes this model realizes that all sides are equal and connected at some point. Each angle of the triangle influences every other angle, showing the interconnectedness of different aspects of therapy.



(Hendrix, Briggs, & Fournier, 1999;
Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003)

Figure 1

At the top of the model is the word context. “Context is considered to be the primary determinant of meaning for most types of information” (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003, p.2). Contextual information includes such information as clients’ culture, ethnicity, gender, family of origin, and other demographic information. Gathering contextual information from families and utilizing the information received in the therapeutic process is vital because by doing so the clinician recognizes that the family is an open system. This is in line with both Bowenian and Network therapists who recognize the family’s interaction with larger systems such as the extended family, the surrounding community, and society as a whole (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001).

Perspective is the second of the three interconnected elements of the INSIGHT Model. "Perspective is the critical aspect of the unique point of view provided by each individual that is influential in any phenomenon that is under investigation" (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003, p.2). Each individual has a perspective on what problems they bring to therapy. Each person in a family or marital relationship has a unique viewpoint that must be considered by the therapist. By considering each person's perspective, the therapist is able to gain a more accurate understanding of the presenting problem, the family's history, present interactional sequences, and process.

A person's perspective is guided by his or her map. A person's map is an interrelated set of beliefs that give meaning to the information he or she receives. Each person interprets and processes information in a different way. Therapists must recognize their client's map is real to him or her. A distinctive map also guides each individual therapist. As clinicians gather information for each respective component of the INSIGHT model, they must be aware that each client's map is influencing his or her perspective.

Interacting with context and perspective in the INSIGHT model is the third component, process. "Process is the observable and patterned response of client systems to previous and current situations" (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003, p.2). Process looks at the interactional nature of relationships, and includes the observational component of the therapeutic process. Systemic language is used to describe behavioral sequences and includes all system members (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003). A crucial component of therapy is

the therapist's observation of family process. Process is a component of the INSIGHT Model that can be better understood through the identification of interaction cycles between partners.

The INSIGHT model provides a conceptual framework for making sense of change processes in couples therapy. The notion of softening has been suggested to be a key event or process in couples therapy that contributes to the change process for couples who present in therapy with negative interaction cycles (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988; Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg & Schindler, 1999; Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998). Softening must be understood in terms of context, perspective and process. Examining the context in which softening occurs will provide increased understanding regarding the role of softening in couples therapy. In addition, factoring in how each partner's context influences their ability to engage in softening will allow researchers and clinicians to gain insight into the components of softening. Finally, evaluating couple interactions and examining process-level information collected in therapy sessions will allow for greater depth of understanding of the notion of softening.

Second-Order Change

Marriage and family therapists, specifically those who are systems thinkers, think of changes that occur for couples as either first-order change or second-order change. "Once a social system such as a family becomes structured, attempts to change the rules constitute what family therapists call 'first-order change' – change within a system that itself remains invariant" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001, p. 51). First-order changes are often the easiest and

quickest changes that occur in therapy and are changes in individual behavior and sequences (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003). Intervening at the process level to facilitate change as described by the INSIGHT Model would be considered first-order change (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003). Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974) provide a poignant example of first-order change through the following illustration: "...a person having a nightmare can do many things in his dream - run, hide, fight, scream, jump off a cliff, etc. - but no change from any one of these behaviors to another would ever terminate the nightmare" (p.10).

Second-order change is change within the system (Nichols & Schartz, 2001), when a system reorganizes (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). Second-order changes tend to be longer-lasting if maintained and are described as a "shift in individual perspective and interpretation of information" (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003). Second-order change fits with the perspective aspect of the INSIGHT model, as clients' alter their perspectives. Using the nightmare illustration to provide an example of second-order change, Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974) write, "The one way out of a dream involved a change from dreaming to waking. Waking, obviously, is no longer a part of the dream but a change to an altogether different state" (p.10). Creating a new interaction cycle requires a second-order change in the couple system. Thus, as softening is potentially a key component of the change process of altering negative interaction cycles for stuck couples, softening can be categorized as a second-order change.

Definition of Terms

Basic definitions for terms used throughout this project will be briefly presented as a means for providing the context in which softening can be better understood through this exploratory study. A brief definition of softening is provided here for the reader to have a sense of what is meant when the term softening is used. This brief definition of softening comes from a synthesis of published research articles addressing the concept of softening. **Softening** is a shift from negative interaction to an expression of vulnerability and increased accessibility and responsiveness (Johnson & Greenberg, 1998; Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999; Johnson, Williams-Keeler, 1998).

Negative interaction between partners is often evidenced by increased levels of defensiveness. Defensive automatic emotional reactions are seen as problematic in negative interactional cycles (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). Some couples become stuck in cycles of distance and defense (Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998). Defensive reactions tend to block the learning of new skills or perspectives (Greenberg & Johnson, 1986). Gottman and Krokoff (1989) used an observational coding system for laboratory videotape and home audiotape analysis in a study of marital interaction and satisfaction. The researchers identified a defensive subscale as the sum of excuse, deny responsibility and negative solution codes as well as a score for minding reading by the partner followed by disagreement (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). In this study, the term **defensiveness** is referred to as a partner's protective reaction that maintains distance from the other partner. Defensiveness can include

blaming one's partner or interacting with a partner with the intention of resisting attack from the other partner, and often leads to increased reactivity.

Reactivity is an emotional response that is set in motion when individuals are exposed to sustained anxiety (Bowen, 1985). In this work, reactivity refers to a partner who responds in a way that indicates a strong reaction to the other partner's behavior. As a partner becomes defensive during an argument, their behavior may trigger the other partner who also increases their own level of defensiveness. During this negative interaction, reactivity levels of each partner may rise as each partner responds with heightened emotional and protective responses.

Process can be understood in this work as observable patterns of interactions between partners (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003). Process is a term also used to describe the course of therapy, including the interactions of each partner and the therapist throughout the progression of therapy as all three members of the therapeutic system work toward change. The term **transition** is used to describe the intermediary period between pre and post softening during therapy. Change often occurs during transitional periods of therapy and can include pivotal moments in therapy.

Softening has been referred to as a key component of the change process in couples therapy. There are two types of change that have been discussed in marriage and family therapy literature. **First-order change** is a change that occurs in individual behavior and sequences. **Second-order change** includes changes in systemic rules, structures, and organization (Fournier, Briggs, &

Hendrix, 2003). The terms that have been defined here will be further discussed throughout the remainder of this work.

Overview of Thesis

Now that the background of the problem has been delineated for the reader, a review of the literature will be provided in chapter two to acquaint the reader with existing studies relative to this study. Published research that addresses topics such as pivotal turning points and change processes in couples therapy, the change process and softening, and concepts relative to softening, including emotional awareness, forgiveness, acceptance, understanding, empathy, and defensiveness, will be reviewed. An overview of research is provided so that the reader can gain understanding as to how the current study fits with previous research related to this project's focus on the concept of softening.

Subsequently, chapter three addresses the methodology used for this study. A description of the research design and sampling method will be given so that readers can have a clear understanding of the steps taken to explore the concept of softening. Explanations of instrumentation and measurement used in the data collection process will be provided. The steps taken to conduct the content analysis for this study will be outlined as well. Through the description of the procedures followed in this study, the researchers attempt to provide enough information so that this study may be replicated.

Chapter four will present the results of the content analysis completed to explore the concept of softening. The results section of this work will follow a

reductionistic approach to offering the results. First, detailed descriptions of what was found relative to possible indicators of softening will be given.

Subsequently, the researcher will provide synthesized descriptions delineated from the detailed descriptions of proposed indicators of softening. Themes emerging from these descriptions will be provided as a means for offering the reader with generalized indicators of softening in couples therapy.

Finally, chapter five will offer a discussion of the findings. Implications, including proposed ideas for future research relative to the topic of softening will be offered. The purpose of chapter five is to provide a brief summary of the background of the research problem covered in the first three chapters given the results of the content analysis. Conclusions and recommendations will be given in light of the results of this study.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

A limited number of articles were found that discussed the concept of softening. No published articles were identified in which softening was the primary focus. Thus, this literature review process began with a search for general information related to turning points in couples therapy. Articles that explored change processes in couples therapy were also identified. A search was then done for all studies that mentioned softening relative to the couples therapy research being conducted. After reviewing the above articles, specific concepts tied to change processes, softening, and defensiveness relative to couples therapy were collected.

The literature review is organized by focusing on studies involving the broad concepts of pivotal moments and change processes in couples therapy. Through this portion of the review specific concepts related to the softening process will be highlighted, such as change processes related to shifts in affect, communication, cognition, and emotional experiencing. Past studies in which the concept of softening was identified will be reviewed next. Next the concept of softening will be explored by reviewing articles involving research of emotional awareness, language, acceptance, understanding, empathy, and defensiveness to set a stage for the dichotomy between defensiveness and softening in couples therapy. Finally, implications for process research will be addressed.

Pivotal Moments in Couples Therapy

The need for outcome research in the field of marriage and family therapy is great, as clinicians seek to provide evidentiary support for the work that they do and to demonstrate the positive results of therapy. Therefore, evaluating what occurs during the therapeutic process is a necessity for gaining in-depth understanding of what contributes to successful outcomes. Few qualitative research studies have focused on the change process (Christensen, Russell, Miller, & Peterson, 1998; Helmeke & Sprenkle, 2000). Exploration of crucial turning points in couples therapy can provide insight into the change process that occurs in therapy.

Helmeke and Sprenkle (2000) conducted a study in which they analyzed clients' perceptions of pivotal moments in therapy. The authors asserted that no previous research had clearly established that couples would classify something from therapy as a pivotal moment. The researchers in this study operated from a grounded theory perspective, generating theory from data analysis through an inductive process. Helmeke and Sprenkle (2000) proposed the following research questions: 1) "What significant or meaningful events in therapy do the participants consider to be pivotal?", and 2) "How do participants account for the pivotal moments they experience in therapy?" (p.471). A purposive sampling procedure was used to select participants for the study, and the sample size was limited to three couples as the study goal was to "generate a rich, thick description of clients' experiences of change processes and because of the thoroughness and depth of the data collection and analysis methodology"

(Helmeke & Sprenkle, 2000, p.473). Key themes and patterns of pivotal moments in couples therapy were identified by generating hypotheses from client's experiences and perceptions in couples therapy. Analyses of videotape and transcripts of sessions, post-session questionnaires, and post-therapy interviews were conducted (Helmeke & Sprenkle, 2000).

Helmeke and Sprenkle's (2000) findings provide some insight regarding client's perceptions of pivotal moments in therapy. All six participants in the study did identify something in therapy as a pivotal moment. As for frequency of pivotal moments, there was an average of one pivotal moment per session reported by participants. Two of the couples attended a total of ten therapy sessions, and the third couple attended three sessions. For the three couples, a total of 24 pivotal moments occurred in the 23 sessions that were analyzed. The authors also recorded data regarding the stage of therapy in which pivotal moments occurred according to the participants. Helmeke and Sprenkle (2000) found that nine of the pivotal moments occurred in the first three sessions, six pivotal moments occurred during the fourth through sixth sessions, and seven during the last four of the ten sessions. Clients' perceptions of pivotal moments that occurred in therapy tended to occur when the topic being discussed was related to a presenting problem. In addition, the topic being discussed when pivotal moments occurred tended to be one that was discussed repeatedly in therapy. Thus, clients in this study were able to identify and articulate specific moments in therapy that they perceived as being pivotal moments (Helmeke & Sprenkle, 2000).

Change Processes in Couples Therapy

Key factors associated with the change process in couples therapy allow for insight regarding what contributes to pivotal turning points in therapy. Christensen et al. (1998) conducted open-ended interviews with 24 married or engaged adults who were receiving therapy in an effort to develop an explanation of the change process in couples therapy. Thirteen couples were represented in the sample, although two partners did not participate in the study. Grounded theory was used to analyze the qualitative response of the 24 participants. Interviewers conducted one-hour interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants were asked to describe turning points, tell what the therapist did to help facilitate change, and describe what was happening at the time they thought the most was being accomplished during therapy. The “constant comparison method” for data analysis was used as a team of four researchers independently developed interpretations and identified themes and then met at specified intervals to discuss the accumulated data and emerging themes (Christensen et al., 1998, p.180).

Three clusters of change – change in affect, cognition and communication were identified and said to have occurred simultaneously with increased relationship satisfaction during the process of therapy (Christensen et al., 1998). “Partners who experienced improvement in their relationship reported making changes in their definition of the problem or the relationship (cognition), in feelings about themselves, their relationship ,or their partner (affect), or in styles of relating and talking (communication)” (Christensen et al., 1998, p.181).

Affect. Christensen et al. (1998) found that when discussing the change process, participants in their study spoke of affect. Participants reported that being able to express how they felt was important. Christensen et al. (1998) also found that the participant's partner's expression of affect was also a key part of the change process. Nonverbal displays of affect can also be a crucial factor in the change process that occurs in couples therapy. Dandeneau and Johnson (1994) proposed that cues such as facial expression convey one partner's internal state to the other. Nonverbal expressions of emotion have a propensity to authenticate a partner's response (Greenberg & Johnson, 1986). Furthermore, experience and expression of powerful emotions that arise when interacting with one's partner tend to evoke empathy (Danendean & Johnson, 1994). Danendean and Johnson (1994) suggest that this leads to a sense of connection in the partner and facilitates sensitive responsiveness. Danendean and Johnson (1994) conclude that if couples express the affect that supports their interactional stances, specifically vulnerabilities, intimacy levels will increase as they encounter each other in a new way in the session. Changes in affect may not occur independently of changes in cognition and communication. Christensen et al. (1998) found that sometimes changes in affect were related to changes in insight and awareness. In fact, change in cognition facilitated change in affect for participants (Christensen et al., 1998)

Cognition. Christensen et al. (1998) also found that participants described a gain in insight and indicated that they had also discovered a new way of thinking about previously known fact or a change in perspective. Greenberg and

Johnson (1986) discussed the role of emotions in creating change in cognition and communication patterns in marital therapy. As emotions are addressed in therapy, shifts in perceptions and meanings can be evoked. Greenberg and Johnson (1986) suggest that emotional experience is a source for information regarding what is currently occurring for a person and can be a tool for changing perceptions and meanings. The change in cognition is influenced by the information incorporated into that person's perception as a result of their partner's emotional experience. "One partner's view of the other's affective experience provides a framework within which new attribution about the other's thoughts and feelings are made" (Greenberg & Johnson, p.6, 1986). As each partner expresses emotion, the other's view of their partner's experience and emotion can shift, leading to new ways of responding to the other partner (Greenberg & Johnson, 1986). Christensen et al. (1998) reported that a change in cognition influenced a change in communication during couples therapy.

Communication. Christensen et al. (1998) found that communication was an important component in the change process for participants in their study. The communication aspect of the change process was understood and experienced in different ways for participants. For example, for some participants communication "facilitated getting in touch emotionally with their partner and becoming reconnected" (Christensen et al., 1998, p. 182). Other participants described communication as a means for seeing things from their partner's perspective by talking to their partner about what they were feeling. Furthermore, communication was consistently linked with participant's shifts in

perspective or understanding (Christensen et al., 1998). Greenberg and Johnson (1986) conceptualized the role of emotion as related to changes in communication, suggesting that the expression of emotions to one's partner communicates interpersonal messages that change the way the relationship is defined.

The Change Process and Softening

Although no published research focuses on the concept of softening as the primary focal point of the study, several studies have been conducted in which the notion of softening is addressed in a portion of the study. For example, Greenberg, Ford, Alden, and Johnson (1993) examined in-session change as they reviewed three different studies and provided implications of these studies relative to the change process. The second study examined by Greenberg et al. investigated peak and poor session process. The researchers suggested that "interactions are changed by accessing and expressing underlying feelings in a self-disclosing affiliative manner" (Greenberg et al., 1993, p.80). The researcher in this study hypothesized that sessions viewed by couples as highly productive or "peak sessions" would differ in depth of experience and degree of affiliation from sessions seen as unproductive or "poor" (Greenberg et al., 1993). The authors did not provide operational definitions for what the researcher meant by "depth of experience" and "degree of affiliation." Measures used in the study included the Experiencing Scale and the Structural Analysis of Social Behavior (SASB). After each therapy session, the husband and wife evaluated certain

aspects of the session as they separately completed a post session questionnaire.

Results supported the hypothesis of a difference in the degree of affiliation between peak and poor sessions. In the peak session events 84% of the statements were affiliative compared to 65% in the poor session events (Greenberg et al., 1993). Experiencing scores indicated that deeper levels of experiencing occurred in peak sessions than in poor sessions. Given the results, the researchers suggested in the discussion portion of their study, that deeper levels of experiencing occur when a person focuses on internal experience. "These results suggest that taking a self-focus, turning inward to one's experience for information about one's responses to situations, and accepting the other in a friendly manner is important in resolving conflict, as opposed to focusing and blaming the other" (Greenberg et al., 1993, p.83). This shift to accepting one's partner rather than blaming that partner may be describing a type of softening experience for that partner as he or she softens their blaming or defensive stance and moves toward accepting his or her partner.

In a study attempting to relate process to outcome, Johnson and Greenberg (1988) conducted a study in which they analyzed the process of change in the "best" sessions of EFT. Six couples were selected for intensive study from a subject pool of an EFT efficacy study. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), Experiencing Scale, and Structural Analysis of Social Behavior (SASB) were used as measures. Two undergraduate trained raters who were unaware of the hypotheses and the outcome status of the couples independently

rated clients' statements on these instruments. The "softening" event in session, described as a "precise pattern of responses," was defined prior to analysis as, 1) High experiencing as indicated on the Experience Scale, 2) both partners' responses falling in the autonomous/affiliation and disclose/affirm portions of the SASB, and 3) Interactions rated had to occur in a space of 6 couple responses (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988, p. 178). Johnson and Greenberg stated that because softening of the blamer is considered crucial in EFT, it was also essential to identify the spouse operating from the blaming position. Johnson and Greenberg (1988) asserted that "identification was unambiguous and there was clear consensus among the raters for all six couples" (p. 179). The researchers were unclear as to how they delineated their operational definition of softening for this study, although they included the criteria used to select softening events.

After reviewing the results of this study, Johnson and Greenberg (1988) reported that five softening events were found in the successful couples while no examples of softening events were found in the unsuccessful couples. Johnson and Greenberg asserted that successful couples were able to maintain a noticeably deeper level of experiencing, disclosure and affiliation. Results also indicated that the enactment of a new interaction pattern was only found in couples who successfully redefined their relationship.

In an article addressing the status and challenges of EFT, Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, and Schnidler (1999) reviewed outcome and process research on EFT and discussed empirical and clinical challenges facing EFT.

The authors concluded that the results of Johnson and Greenberg's (1988) study, confirm the significance of encouraging couples to explore their emotional responses in a way that facilitates emotional engagement (Johnson et al., 1999). Johnson et al. (1999) described interventions in couples therapy where interactional positions shift and new bonding experiences occur. The authors maintained that the research conducted on the EFT model of couples therapy has not just specified the variables associated with change, but has begun to provide descriptions of change events, such as a softening change event, that occur in a specific context (Johnson et al., 1999). They conclude that examining "the process of change in specific intermediate outcomes that partners face in therapy, such as achieving closure on past betrayals and learning to depend on the other partner again" (p. 76) could be a relevant direction for researchers to move in the future.

Johnson and Williams-Keeler (1998) discussed the application of EFT in couples in which one or both partners had experienced significant trauma. Initially, the authors discussed the convergence of trauma and marital therapy, focusing on the idea that partners seek marital therapy to cope with relationship distress that has been generated or intensified by the effects of trauma (Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998). Next, the idea of the marital relationship as a recovery environment was explored. Marital therapy can be a natural environment for developing strategies to deal with traumatic stress. Marital therapy can be the context in which the traumatized partner "learns some mastery over the effects of

trauma and is defined as worthy of acceptance and support from a caring other²⁴ (Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998, p. 27).

Johnson and Williams-Keeler (1998) also examined the treatment of couples dealing with trauma through an EFT approach. They asserted that the therapist helps the couple to access and reprocess affect and then assists the couple in developing new interactions between the partners. The authors then describe the stages of treatment as stabilization, building self and relational capacities, and integration. As a final point, Johnson and Williams-Keeler (1998) offer an example of a change event occurring in couples therapy. In this example, one partner of the couple presenting in therapy had been traumatized. The traumatized partner was an incest survivor who had been experiencing severe flashbacks and had a history of self-mutilation. The couple presented in therapy with a pursue/distance withdraw pattern. Johnson and Williams-Keeler (1998) reported that in the twelfth session of couples therapy, the therapist structured a softening event. The softening event was said to have occurred when the traumatized partner asked for contact and comfort from her spouse. Congruent with previously mentioned definitions of softening, Johnson and Williams-Keeler (1998) described softening as “a change event in which a hostile or pursuer partner accesses attachment needs and fears and asks for them to be met in a vulnerable manner that primes a positive response from the other partner” (p. 34). The authors then provided a brief transcript of the session in which softening occurred and descriptions of specific interventions utilized by the therapist including empathic interpretation, summarizing underlying emotions,

relating to negative cycle, reflecting immediate experience, directing interaction, fostering risk-taking, validating, heightening process, and empathic summary (Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998).

The most current definition of softening was provided by Johnson (2003) in an article exploring the revolution in couples therapy from a practitioner-scientist perspective. Johnson defined “softenings” as key change events. “Successful softenings are characterized by deepening levels of emotional experiences and a movement towards affiliative interactions” (Johnson, 2003, p.372). Johnson also described softening as when a critical or blaming partner risks and reaches for closeness promoting affiliative emotional engagement. Johnson (2003) wrote that as couples therapy integrates description, prediction and explanation, the outcome creates a coherent whole resulting from theory, practice and systematic investigation. Expanding the definition of the concept of softening can occur through exploring the change process, including crucial turning points in couples therapy and through looking at the literature describing associated concepts.

Softening Explored

Emotional Awareness. “Deepening levels of emotional experience and a movement towards affiliative interactions” (Johnson, 2003, p.372) as been described as a significant characteristic of softening in couples therapy. Exploring emotional awareness relative to couples therapy can provide additional insight into the idea of opening up emotional experience for couples in therapy as a means for facilitating softening. Croyle and Waltz (2002) examined emotional

awareness and couples' relationship satisfaction. The researchers examined the effects of a tendency for partners to respond to difficult situations with "soft" emotions such as sadness and fear as opposed to "hard" emotions including anger and resentment (Croyle & Waltz, 2002, p. 435). Croyle and Waltz maintained that emotional awareness can range from simple awareness of physiological sensations to labeled experiences. The researcher proposed that being able to identify and recognize more than one emotion is present at a given time is an example of a higher level of emotional awareness. Croyle and Waltz (2002) suggested that emotional awareness is conceptually distinct from emotional experiencing in that emotional experiencing is synonymous with feeling (having or perceiving a physical sensation or state of mind) and includes the act of allowing an emotion to be felt. Emotional awareness involves knowing, realizing or recognizing the emotion is present and can include emotional experiencing. Croyle and Waltz (2002) maintained that in practice emotional experiencing and emotional awareness often overlap. Croyle and Waltz (2002) made a connection between emotional awareness and EFT as they described EFT's focus as helping couples to identify unexpressed emotions and to redefine couples' interactions in the context of these newly experienced emotions, thereby enhancing emotional awareness.

Croyle and Waltz's (2002) study had four goals: 1) "test the hypothesis that the level of emotional awareness is related to couple satisfaction, and more specifically that emotional awareness within the couple relationship is more closely tied to satisfaction than general emotional awareness"; 2) test the

“distinction of awareness of “hard” versus “soft” emotions with the hypothesis that greater awareness of soft emotions is related to increased relationship satisfaction”; 3) test “whether greater discrepancy between partners in level of emotional awareness is predictive of reduced relationship satisfaction”; and 4) examine potential gender differences in general emotional awareness and emotional awareness within the couple relationship context (p. 437). The participants in this study included 56 heterosexual couples who had been living together for at least 1 year. The couples were recruited from the community through advertising and were offered a financial incentive to participate, or at least one member of the couples selected were enrolled in a psychology class and participated to fulfill a class requirement. The measures used in this study were the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), a self-report measure of relationship satisfaction, and the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS), a 20-item structured interview measuring emotional awareness. The Couple’s Emotional Awareness Scale (CEAS), a 12-item structured interview measuring emotional awareness within the couple relationship and the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised (WAIS-R), a vocabulary subtest estimating the verbal intelligence of partners, were also used in this study. The scores calculated from each measure were analyzed by calculating hierarchical multiple regressions and correlations.

The results of this study suggested that emotional awareness plays a role in couple satisfaction and differs for men and women. The authors conclude that “women appear to be more emotionally aware in response to salient couples’

situations than are men” (Croyle & Waltz, 2002, p. 442). However, men and women did not differ as far as the level of elaboration and awareness in emotional response to more general life situations and other relationships. Results indicated that discrepancy in relationship emotional awareness is related to decreased satisfaction for both men and women. The study found that higher levels of emotional awareness predict decreased relationship satisfaction for women and emotional awareness did not appear to predict relationship satisfaction for men (Croyle & Waltz, 2002). Awareness of hard emotions was related to decreased relationship satisfaction for women, but not for men. The results suggested that soft emotions were not associated with relationship satisfaction as hypothesized. Croyle & Waltz (2002) conclude that a clinical implication for therapists to consider is that if a higher level of emotional awareness is a goal, then clinicians must also encourage consideration of the partner’s level of awareness to avoid widening a discrepancy between partners.

Forgiveness. The therapeutic change process contains several components. Forgiveness of one’s partner is a potential component of softening as couples increase emotional awareness and experience. Butler, Dahlin, and Fife (2002) studied language factors in marital therapy that affect clients’ acceptance of forgiveness. Participants in this study were recruited using quota sampling (attempting to construct a representative sample without random selection). A total pool of 862 spouses recruited by university students with family homes throughout the United States were narrowed to 318 spouses. A quasi-experimental survey design was used to examine differences in reported

acceptability of forgiveness intervention in therapy. The four independent variables included rationale, choice, problem type, and gender. Each participant was randomly given 3 hypothetical problem types in a vignette and then rated the treatment acceptability of forgiveness using the Treatment Acceptability Questionnaire (TAQ). The respondents were viewed as hypothetical clients and may or may not have had the problems described in the vignettes. One-way ANOVA of TAQ Scores were calculated and examined. Post-Hoc t-Tests of differences in TAQ scores by gender were also calculated.

Results in this study indicated significant differences in rationale for forgiveness work as evidenced by personal growth, spiritual issues, and relationship reconciliation being rated as more acceptable than others' growth and pardoning/condoning rationales (Butler et al., 2002). The problem type itself had no effect on the participants' acceptance of forgiveness intervention. Butler et al. (2002) assert that these results must be interpreted cautiously because it is unclear if participants were responding to the problem itself or the perceived severity of the problem. The study found no significant differences based on participants' gender in the acceptability of forgiveness intervention. Butler et al. (2002) conclude that their findings indicated that respondents view forgiveness as an acceptable intervention and that therapists should be selective about how they articulate or rationalize forgiveness intervention when working with couples.

Acceptance. As clinicians assist couples in altering their negative interaction cycle and implement interventions in the hope that at least one partner softens, understanding the role of acceptance and change interventions

can be helpful in designing these interventions. Cordova, Jacobson, and Christensen (1998) conducted a study in which they examined changes in couples communication over the course of Integrative Behavior Couple Therapy (IBCT) and Traditional Behavioral Couple Therapy (TBCT). IBCT attempts to improve TBCT by incorporating an emphasis on promoting acceptance. Encouraging partners to express the soft emotions underlying expressions of hard emotions is one of the main acceptance techniques utilized in an IBCT approach (Cordova et al., 1998, p.439). Cordova et al. (1998) suggest that “soft” emotional expressions promote intimacy and create a nonhostile environment in which partners can feel close to each other despite their problems” (p. 439). Perhaps such an environment is linked to a softening event or process.

Participants were 12 maritally distressed couples recruited through public service announcements in local newspapers and were randomly assigned to either IBCT or TBCT. The Global Distress Scale of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI), a questionnaire that generates scores measuring marital distress, was the measure used in this study. Selected sessions were rated on four 5-point scales. These scales were designed to measure soft emotions, detachment, hard expressions and engaging in the problem. A soft expression was defined as “any statement or action by a client expressing such feelings as hurt, loneliness, insecurity, fear, sadness, shame, guilt, desire, love, caring, pleasure, empathy, tenderness, or other emotion revealing the client’s vulnerability in the relationship” (Cordova et al., 1998, p. 442). “Hard emotional expression are those that communicate hostile anger, contempt, and intolerance”

(Cordova et al., 1998, p. 439). Two early, middle and late sessions were selected for rating by four trained raters.

Results of this study indicated that IBCT couples expressed more nonblaming descriptions of problems and more soft emotions during the late stages of therapy than TBCT couples. Results suggested that increases in nonblaming descriptions of problems were significantly correlated with increases in marital satisfaction (Cordova et al., 1998). Cordova et al. conclude that couples' open nonblaming discussions of mutual problems are associated with decrease in global distress.

Understanding. As couples experience change, whether through higher levels of emotional experiencing, forgiveness or acceptance, an increase in understanding and increased levels of intimacy also contribute to the change process in couples therapy. Heller and Wood (1998) conducted a study in which they examined gender and three aspects of marital intimacy. These researchers reported that the "interactive process of intimacy suggests that both understanding and feeling understood are essential to feeling intimate within a relationship" (Heller & Wood, 1998, p. 283). All aspects of self-disclosure are crucial to marital intimacy as they lead to mutual understanding and empathy. Heller and Wood suggest that the experience of understanding one's partner may lead to greater trust, thus facilitating greater expression of vulnerability and self-disclosure.

Empathy. The ability to be empathic towards one's partner can often lead to greater understanding and emotional awareness, and greater empathy can

create a more positive interaction cycle to replace a negative cycle. Giblin (1996) suggested that there are cognitive and affective components of empathy. Terms such as perspective taking, role taking, and imagining oneself in their partner's place are examples of the cognitive component of empathy. The affective element of empathy involves taking on the feelings of another. Giblin (1996) asserted that perspective taking contains two factors. The first factor is called the strategic factor and occurs when a partner actively takes on their partner's perspective. Giblin (1996) provides the following example to illustrate the strategic factor: "When I'm upset with my partner, I usually try to put myself in his/her shoes for a while" (p.232). The second factor, the cognizance factor, is an understanding and awareness of a partner's feelings, attitudes and needs. The statement, "I often seem to know how my partner feels," is an example of the cognizance factor of perspective taking (Giblin, 1996, p.232). Shifting from a defensive and non-empathic position to a stance that allows partners to actively take their partner's perspective can be a key turning point in couples therapy.

Defensiveness. Gaining insight into previous literature describing characteristics of softening such as emotional experience and awareness, forgiveness, acceptance, understanding, and empathy will assist clinicians and researchers in understanding the change process in couples therapy including crucial turning points. In contrast, understanding what blocks the occurrence of softening and contributes to couples' "stuckness" will also help clinicians gain insight into the change process in couples therapy. Couples who are stuck in negative interaction cycles often engage in defensive and blaming behaviors.

Defensiveness is seen as having “system-disintegrating properties” with its “circular and increasingly destructive” way of responding to a partner within a couple system (Waldron, Turner, Barton, Alexander, & Cline, 1997, p. 234). One partner’s defensive or blaming behavior often triggers the other partner to engage in the same type of behaviors as a means for protecting vulnerabilities, thus creating a negative interaction cycle. Examples of defensive communications include messages that are judgmental, overtly controlling of another, indifferent or reflect superiority (Waldron et. al, 1997). As a therapist works with couples who are stuck in a negative cycle filled with defensive communications and behaviors, empowering the couple to replace defensiveness with support is a way to disrupt the negative cycle, creating a new interaction cycle. Support messages include those communications that provide or seek information, seek to solve problems, or reflect empathic understanding (Waldron et. al, 1997).

The goal of this section, Softening Explored, was to address concepts found in the literature and to expand the notion of softening by providing a foundation of others’ work on a conceptual level. Research that explored the topics of emotional awareness, forgiveness, acceptance, understanding, empathy, and defensiveness were reviewed. The next section will supplement this discussion by offering ideas connecting the notion of softening to process research.

Process Research

Although the concept of softening has not been the primary focus of published research, studies associated with softening and concepts related to softening have been reviewed in an effort to provide the reader with a background of previous research related to this topic. The concept of softening as a component of the change process can be better understood through process research. Examining the components of the change process provide greater insight into the change processes that occur in couples therapy.

Pinsof (1989) provided a conceptual framework and methodological criteria for process research in family therapy. Pinsof (1989) ascertained that process research must be consistent with systemic epistemology. Focusing on circular interaction, over time, between and within the therapist and family systems and their subsystems allows for useful process research (Pinsof, 1989). Thus, when deciding on a research design researchers must determine which approach will be able to measure circular interactions and processes in therapy. Finally, Pinsof (1989) maintained that descriptiveness and specificity are imperative to progress in process research. Using terminology found in the literature associated with the concept of softening in the descriptions of the results of this study is imperative. Considering the importance of process research maintaining coherence with systemic theory and reviewing systemic concepts relative to the softening concept will provide a foundation for conducting exploratory research on this component of change in couples therapy.

Conclusion

Softening has been identified as a potentially important component of the change process in couples therapy. This study seeks to add to the groundwork that has been discussed in the literature reviewed in this chapter for the operationalization of softening. Broader concepts of pivotal moments and change processes in couples therapy were discussed to provide the reader with current process research and findings. Studies in which the concept of softening was discussed were reviewed to provide the reader with examples of current perspectives on softening. The concept of softening was explored by reviewing articles involving research of emotional awareness, language, acceptance, understanding, empathy, and defensiveness.

This study aims to explore the concept of softening through process research. Examining the softening phenomenon through a process oriented research study will provide a greater understanding of what softening looks like across the course of therapy. In the field of marriage and family therapy there has been a recent increase in the number of studies exploring the process of change (Christensen et al., 1998). This exploratory study will be conducted by analyzing therapist's descriptions of behaviors and observations that have occurred in successful couples therapy. Examining this component of change through a process research study will add to the work being done in the marriage and family therapy field as researchers and clinicians seek to create operational measures of softening to further outcome research and interventions leading to change.

Research Design

The intent of this study is descriptive and exploratory. Kumar (1996) maintains that descriptive research attempts to describe a situation, problem, or phenomenon. Exploratory research is conducted when a researcher wants to explore areas that have not been fully studied (Kumar 1996). Exploratory research looks for patterns and ideas rather than testing or confirming hypotheses (Vogt, 1999). Because softening is a concept that has not been well described or explored in detail, conducting a study that is both descriptive and exploratory will help pave the way for future research relative to this concept. The purpose of the current study is to add to the groundwork for the operationalization of softening by identifying as many potential indicators of softening that can be found in a purposively identified sample of couples where change occurred. In exploratory research it is best to present as many ideas as possible recognizing that the empirical process to follow will narrow the list through further research and consensus by investigators.

A retrospective developmental case-study design will be used in gathering the data for analysis. Retrospective studies are conducted on the basis of data available for that period and investigate a phenomenon, situation, problem or issue that has happened in the past (Kumar, 1996). The case study method allows for the intensive analysis of specific details often overlooked by other methods (Kumar, 1996). The data contained in the case files of selected cases

for this study has been previously collected, recorded, and filed by the therapists involved in each case.

Utilizing a case-study design allows the researchers to analyze previously collected data related to the phenomenon being studied. Session summaries will be the source of the raw data collected for analysis and contain descriptions of what the therapists observed and clients reported in each session for the cases selected for this study. "Formal case study research is designed to investigate a specific phenomenon for the purpose of advancing knowledge about that phenomenon" (Moon & Trepper, 1996, p. 401). This study aims to investigate the phenomenon of softening for the purpose of contributing to the work that has been done for the operationalization of softening. By examining previously collected data from session summaries, the researchers seek to provide a descriptive list of potential indicators of softening. "In family therapy, formal case study research can be used to develop a rich description of an individual, a system, or a therapeutic process. It can also be used to discover or verify family therapy theory and to explain how and when specific therapeutic processes work best" (Moon & Trepper, 1996, p.401).

The unit of analysis is on individual behavior and couple level interaction across several weeks of therapy. The content of session summaries was reviewed in order to provide a detailed description of the therapist's observations, couples' reports and behaviors, and individual-level reports and behaviors. Because this study is descriptive and exploratory, any indicators associated with

ideas and research described in the literature relative to the concept of softening are included to provide an exhaustive list of indicators of softening.

Sampling

The target population for this study were couples seeking services for couples therapy. The sampling procedure is purposive since cases were selected to fit with predetermined criteria and came from a client population who presented a particular problem in therapy. This type of sampling method is utilized when the research is describing a phenomenon or developing descriptions about which little is known (Kumar, 1996). The sampling frame included couples receiving services in a university marriage and family therapy training clinic during 1993-2003. For this study over 600 cases were available to be included in the sample.

In order to conduct an intensive content analysis of all session summaries written for each couples therapy case, the number of cases involving couples therapy was narrowed further to fit with the intent of the study. Using a small sample size allows the researcher to provide detailed descriptions of potential indicators of softening. The case study design “is a rigorous methodology characterized by in-depth study of a few purposively selected cases using multiple sources and methods of data collection” (Moon & Trepper, 1996, p.401). The purpose of this study is not to test hypotheses, but to provide detailed descriptions that will contribute to the foundation for future qualitative and quantitative studies of the concept of softening.

Several criteria were used to narrow the sample from over 600 cases to 7 cases to be analyzed. Moon and Trepper (1996) specify that the most

appropriate way to select cases for a case study is to identify a *purposive sample* that will meet the goals of description for the phenomenon being studied. The cases studied were selected according to purposive criteria based on the goals of this study. These include 1) use of a revised session summary that recorded detailed descriptions of what occurred in session, including an interactional cycle, 2) clients who completed therapy goals, 3) couples therapy was the predominant mode of therapy, 4) couples therapy was not premarital work, and 5) couples who presented with a specific problem and cases that discussed defensiveness, partners' vulnerabilities, and interaction cycles in therapy. These criteria are expanded in the next five paragraphs.

The first level of criteria used to narrow the sample included selecting cases in which a revised session summary form was used by therapists for recording keeping. The revised session summary form represented a shift in the philosophy of the center conducting marital and family therapy that influenced record keeping, formalized hypothesis testing, and interactional cycle analysis. The revised session summary provided greater detail for description of what happened in session. Because the sample is purposive, cases containing the former session summaries were not selected as they would have decreased the likelihood of identifying potential indicators of softening. This narrowed the sample to 104 potential cases to be selected for this study.

The second level of criteria used to narrow the sample included cases in which the clients met their therapy goals. Current literature that discusses the concept of softening asserts that softening occurs in successful cases in which

the EFT conceptual framework and interventions are utilized and no examples of softening events were found in the unsuccessful couples (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988). Termination forms were analyzed in order to determine which cases met therapy goals. For the purpose of this study, cases involving successful treatment were those cases in which there was completion of therapy goals. The termination form provides a place for therapists to identify the reason for the termination of cases. The first reason reads, "Completion of therapy." There were 23 cases out of the 104 cases using the revised session summary in which the therapist indicated that the case had been closed because of completion of therapy.

Next, cases identified as "couples therapy" were selected rather than cases involving individual therapy, family therapy, or group therapy as this study's focus is on couple interaction. The remaining 18 cases were narrowed by including those cases that did not involve pre-marital counseling. Pre-marital cases generally do not involve chronic problems such as inability to resolve conflict effectively or dissatisfaction with communication. Eleven of the 18 cases did not involve premarital counseling and thus were included in the sample.

Subsequently the presenting problem at the beginning of therapy found on the backside of the termination form was examined to see if the case met the following criteria: a couple who presented with a problem such as inability to resolve conflict effectively, dissatisfaction with communication, desire for increase in connection, and/or difficulty adjusting to a life stressor or transitions. The problem at the end of therapy was also examined to determine if the couple

had resolved the problem they had come into therapy ~~for~~ and to see if the couple reported making a change by the end of therapy. The information regarding the presenting problem at the beginning and ending of therapy is found on the termination form completed by the therapists. The therapist provides a description that is a paragraph in length on the back of the form.

Cases that discussed defensiveness, partners' vulnerabilities, and interactional cycles in therapy were included in the sample. These types of cases were included as the sample being studied was purposive and the researchers wanted to study cases that were more likely to have the phenomenon of softening that was trying to be described and contain summaries in which the quality of the description of what occurred in session would provide greater possibility for finding potential indicators of softening.

Seven cases were selected as fitting with the intent of this study. For descriptive case studies of this nature, five is a common number of cases to be used. A multiple case study assumes that depth of description of a phenomenon is of main interest, but breadth is also important and requires more than one case (Moon & Trepper, 1996). The researchers did not want to limit the breadth of results by limiting the sample to one case, but did not want to lose depth by using a larger sample. The researchers' decision to choose more than five cases was to provide more breadth of descriptions.

Instrumentation and Measurement

Termination Report Form. The termination form was used in the sampling process for this study (see Appendix A). A termination form is completed by the therapist for each case. This form provides a brief and concise summary of the type of sessions and reason for termination. The dates on the form include the date of intake, first session, last session, and date the termination form was signed by a clinical supervisor. The next section describes the reason for terminating therapy such as completion of therapy goals, client request, no show, or other reasons not listed previously. Whether or not the client was referred and to what agency or professional is also recorded on the termination form. Finally, a brief description of the presenting problem at the beginning and end of therapy is recorded. This section provides a brief look at the nature of the presenting problem, interventions used, level of success in meeting established therapy goals, and areas for growth. This form is used in narrowing the sample for this study and to look at the presenting problems of the couples who were seeking services.

Session Summaries. The therapist who has been assigned to the case completes a summary of each session. The session summary is divided into two parts (see Appendix B). The first section includes pre-session information such as therapy goals, session goals, hypotheses, and homework from prior session. As the therapist gathers information for each case, the therapist decides what is most informative to record for assessment and intervention. This information is then recorded in the INSIGHT Model's (Hendrix, Briggs, & Fournier, 1999;

Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003) context, perspective, or process section. The interactional cycle is also described in the pre-session portion of the summary. The interactional cycle usually includes clients' behaviors, intentions, interpretations, and vulnerabilities. This information is gathered as the therapists observe the couple's interaction in session and from the couple's report of what their typical arguments or disagreements look like. Issues of concern are also listed on the pre-session summary and are ranked on a Likert scale from 1-Minimal to 5-Significant. Issues of concern include matters such as domestic violence, potential abuse, and suicidal ideation or attempts, and are ranked on the Likert type scale from one to five.

The post-session section of the summary includes a description of what occurred in session, including therapist observations, client reports and behaviors, and supervisor phone-ins. The post-session summary is divided into the following sections: homework, break question/activity, summary of session content, supervisor messages, interventions used, progress toward each session goal, homework given, progress toward each therapy goal, new context, perspective, and process pieces of information, and changes to hypotheses. Both pre-session and post-session portions of the case summaries were used to identify descriptions of clients' defensiveness and softening and the couple's interactional cycle. The session summaries provide the most detailed description of potential softening in partners who are attending couples therapy.

The session summaries provide therapists' descriptions of crucial pieces of information related to the concept of softening. The therapists' written depiction

of a couple's interactional cycle provides necessary information regarding how the couple interacts, insight into how the couple gets stuck, and possible defenses. The therapists' observations and descriptions regarding each partner's vulnerabilities provide clues to defensiveness and possible interventions related to softening.

Background questionnaire. This form is used as a means to gather information in order to provide demographic descriptions of each case used in the analysis and the clients' initial view of the presenting problem (see Appendix D). The background questionnaire is a form on which clients record demographic information as well as their perspective of the presenting problem before the first therapy session. The first three pages ask for factual information including demographic information, symptomology, current medications being used, substance abuse, suicide history, and previous and current mental health services utilized by the client.

The fourth page of the background form provides a place for clients to briefly describe the major reason they are seeking services at this time. A list of reasons for seeking services at this time including relationship enrichment, marital enrichment, marital conflict, and family stress is provided for the client to check all that apply to them. Clients are asked to indicate how serious they believe the problem is right now by circling one of four possibilities, 1) Not at All Serious, 2) Slightly Serious, 3) Moderately Serious, and 4) Very Serious. The client is then asked how likely they think the problem is to change by circling one of four choices, 1) Not at All Likely, 2) Slightly Likely, 3) Moderately Likely, and 4)

Very Likely. Finally, the client is asked to write a statement of what they hope to gain from services. The background form is not used for content analysis to identify descriptions of defensiveness or indicators of softening. The background form will be used in the results section to provide a description of relative demographic information and clients' view of the problem before reporting results of identified indicators of softening.

Data Collection, Process Observations and Recording

The session summary is the form used for content analysis. Two sections from the pre-session portion of the session summary form were examined for possible indicators of softening. First the hypotheses section, containing the therapist's systemic hypotheses was analyzed. In the hypothesis section, the therapist first provides a description of the problem followed by a statement of the underlying problem (Whiteside & Steinberg, 2002). Then a content analysis of the section of the session summary where the therapist describes the couples' interactional cycle was conducted. The therapist's description of the couples' interactional cycle often includes a list of clients' behaviors, intentions, and interpretations of their partners' behaviors.

All post-session sections of the session summary form were analyzed with the exception of the homework given. The homework given segment is a place for the therapist to record homework assigned to the couple to be completed outside of session. Thus, the sections of the post-session summary examined for content analysis include the clients' response to the homework given in the previous session, break question/activity, summary of session content,

supervisor phone messages, progress toward session goals, progress toward therapy goals, changes to hypotheses and new information gathered from the session that fits into the context, perspective, and process aspects of the INSIGHT MODEL (Hendrix, Briggs, & Fournier, 1999; Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003). These sections of the session summary were analyzed as they provide descriptions of the processes occurring in the therapy session.

A code-sheet was developed by two researchers to provide a consistent method of recording indicators of softening found by analyzing the session summaries (see Appendix D). The code sheet contains three headings: 1) Session, 2) Defensive Descriptions, and 3) Softening Descriptions. The column labeled Session provides a place for the researcher to record the session number. Under the Defensive Descriptions and Softening Descriptions columns, three sub-headings were listed. These sub-headings were labeled male, female and couple. Descriptions are categorized by recording the information in the male, female, or couple columns to allow for individual and couple level descriptions of defensiveness and indicators of softening. Codes are used to indicate the source of the observation such as, 1) T-therapist, 2) C-client, 3) M-male, or 4) F-female. To identify whether the description was an observation by the therapist (O) or an observation or report by a client (R).

Process of Investigation

The researchers first completed the initial content analysis of session summaries. For each of the seven cases, a thorough analysis of each session summary was completed. An examination of each session summary for each

case and recorded observations that were identified as coming from the perspectives of therapists, male partner or female partner was conducted and the findings were reported verbatim from the session summaries. Complete descriptions that were potentially related to softening were recorded on the code-sheet created by the two researchers (see Appendix D).

The second step of the content analysis consisted of examining the coding-charts containing the descriptions recorded from the session summaries. Key phrases that were potential indicators of softening and verified by the two researchers found in the complete descriptions were highlighted for categorization of results. The key phrases highlighted were then transferred to a list form. Key phrases associated with descriptions of defensiveness were listed under the heading of Defensiveness. Under the heading of Softening, key phrases taken from the highlighted coding chart were recorded. These lists were sorted case by case.

The third step of the content analysis involved looking for themes emerging from the lists of phrases describing defensiveness and softening from each case. Phrases that were similar were grouped together as a means for finding themes among all the cases. During this phase of the content analysis, the lists were not categorized case by case; rather key phrases from each case were grouped together if they were similar to other phrases. Key themes were then identified and the phrases associated with each theme were listed under each theme heading.

Analysis

Since the purpose of this study is the creation of a list and categorization scheme of potential indicators of softening, numerical analytic procedures are not used. Tables and results will reflect a process of content synthesis for submission to other researchers to continue the process of operationalizing “softening.” Synthesis involved a process of identification and narrowing with final results consensus between two researchers – the author and a clinical supervisor/thesis advisor.

Limitations

There are several limitations to consider in this study. First, the sample used in this study may not be generalizable to all clients seeking couples therapy. The sample was taken from a training-clinic that serves a specific population that may not reflect a wide cross-section of clients seeking couples therapy. Second, a small sample size was used because of the exploratory nature of this study. The intent of this study was to provide detailed descriptions of potential indicators of softening. The sample size was limited to provide greater depth of description of all potential indicators of softening found during the content analysis. However, the small sample size limits the results by narrowing possible descriptions of defensiveness and softening to be included in the results. Including a larger number of couples therapy cases may have provided a greater number of indicators of defensiveness and softening.

Third, reliability of results is also limited by the fact that only two researchers were involved in data collection and case study analysis. Using

multiple researchers would have increased the reliability of results. Fourth, case study was proposed to be the most appropriate method for conducting this exploratory study. However, the study was limited to the potential indicators described by therapists in case notes. Interviewing therapists, clients, and observing video-tape of sessions would have provided more detail of descriptions and decreased the bias of the two researchers.

Fifth, because the therapists for each of the cases selected for this study are part of a master's level graduate program for training in marriage and family therapy, the therapists practiced from a similar theoretical approach to couples therapy. The therapist's theoretical guide most likely influenced the interventions used in therapy to facilitate change and the way the therapist described these changes on session summaries. In addition, the session summary forms were the same for each therapy session, providing some level of consistency for information that was recorded after sessions.

Sixth, the language used by therapists to record behaviors in couples therapy was another limitation of this study. Some of the observations reported in tables were clearly descriptions of behaviors, while others were therapists' labels of behavior. For example, the label of one partner "pursuing" and the other partner "distancing" are descriptions used by therapists to explain client behavior and interaction. The results reported in this study were taken from session summaries and many types of labels used by therapists to describe client behavior and interaction were reported without the context of what that label meant in a particular session. Descriptions found in session summaries did

not describe what the “pursing” or “distancing” behavior looked like in session. More specific description can be provided in future research by focusing on specific behaviors observed rather than labels used to describe client behavior.

Finally, the focus of this study was not to compare ethnic groups, but to look at all potential indicators of softening found in successful couples therapy. However, an additional limitation is that ethnicity was not included in the background information provided for each case. Defensiveness and softening could be different for various ethnic groups. Although there were several limitations to this study, the research design and methodology was determined to be the most appropriate for conducting an exploratory study utilizing archival data to contribute the preliminary groundwork for the operationalization of softening. The limitations of this study will be considered and discussed in Chapter 5 in the recommendations for future research.

Chapter 4

Results

The intent of this exploratory study is to contribute to the preliminary groundwork for the operationalization of the concept of softening. Four research questions were posed in the first chapter of this study as a means for exploring the concept of softening. The themes of these four research questions will be addressed in the results section of this study. First, the literature suggests that softening is a component of the change process and possible turning point in therapy. Thus, examining behaviors occurring in couples therapy may provide descriptions of indicators of softening. Examining possible links between the reduction of defensiveness and an increase in softening behaviors may allow for greater understanding of softening. Finally, examining softening within the context of the change process may provide insight into the role of softening in the alteration of negative interactional cycles in couples therapy.

The intent of this study is to start with abstractions of defensiveness and softening, then move to specific descriptions taken from session summaries, and finally to offer thematic or conceptual level summaries of the descriptions. The content analysis process was conducted to identify indicators of defensiveness and softening. The next step was to identify thematic similarities in the descriptions of defensiveness and softening identified in the content analysis. Identified themes were selected after reviewing the data from the content analysis. When possible, theme names were taken from the research reviewed

in Chapter 2. When themes went beyond the current literature, the researchers developed a new name for these observations.

The results of content analysis are offered in summary charts and discussion. First, background information for each case is provided. Background forms (see Appendix C) were used to provide contextual information for each case and to provide each partner's initial view of the presenting problem before beginning couples therapy. Subsequently, descriptions of defensiveness and softening descriptions are given in case-level charts. Raw data from the content analysis of the available session summaries for each case are reported on a case level.

Results regarding case-by-case progressions or transitions from defensiveness to softening over time will be addressed. The number of defensiveness and softening descriptions will be reported by taking the total number of sessions for each case and splitting the total number of sessions into two halves to reflect indicators found in the first and second phase of therapy. The total number of sessions for each case is divided by two to determine which session numbers will represent the first and second half of therapy. Next, emerging themes identified from the results of the content analysis will be reported. Findings are reported in a series of tables reflecting case level results followed by a series of tables for across-case summaries of defensiveness and softening themes and transitions to increased softening descriptions.

Case Level Results

Case 1. The first case analyzed for descriptions of defensiveness and indicators of softening involved a married couple. The presenting problem as described by the therapists on the termination form (see Appendix A) was to help the couple adjust to recent events relevant to one partner's alcohol and drug abuse and treatment. These events were described as putting strain on the parental/marital dyad. The couple attended a total of 14 sessions. A master's-level marriage and family intern and a licensed marital and family therapist who was also a clinical supervisor and clinical faculty member were the co-therapy team for all 14 sessions. There were 2.5 family sessions in which the couple attended therapy with their daughter. The remaining 11.5 sessions were couple sessions in which only the husband and wife attended. Upon successful completion of therapy, the therapists stated that the couple reported that understanding their strategy of defending their own vulnerabilities in an emotional cycle was most helpful for change to occur. A brief look at each partner's pre-therapy descriptions of the presenting problem provides insight into each partner's perspective of the problem (see Table 1a).

Table 1a

Background Information for Case #1

Case	1	1
Gender	Male	Female
Years married	10	10
Times married before	0	0
Children	1	1
Reasons for seeking services	Relationship enrichment Marital enrichment Family enrichment Child behavior problems Drug abuse-adult Family Stress	Family conflict Parenting-two parent family Alcohol abuse-adult Drug abuse –adult Family stress
How serious is the problem right now?	Moderately Serious	Very Serious
How likely is the problem to change?	Moderately Likely	Very Likely

The 14 session summaries written for each therapy session were analyzed for descriptions of defensiveness and softening. A total of 22 descriptions of defensiveness were recorded from the session summaries onto the coding chart (see Appendix D). Key phrases describing defensiveness were identified. The results of the content analysis for Case 1 are listed in Table 1b. Key phrases suggested to be descriptions of softening are listed in Table 1c. A total of 38 softening descriptions were identified through the content analysis process.

Across the course of therapy as the number of softening descriptions increased, the number and frequency of descriptions of defensiveness decreased. For session numbers 1-7, the researchers recorded a total of 13 descriptions of defensiveness and 6 softening descriptions. As therapy continued the number of softening descriptions identified out-numbered the quantity of defensive behaviors recorded. For session numbers 8-14 there were

9 defensive descriptions recorded from the session summaries and 32 softening descriptions identified.

Table 1b

Results of Content Analysis of Defensive Descriptions for Case #1

Male	Female	Couple
CR: (lack of) trust (3).	CR: (lack of) trust (2).	CR: both get defensive during their fights.
CR: (unable to) forgive partner.	CR: unable to forgive self.	TO: couple uses anger to protect themselves during arguments.
CR: defensive out of fear.	CR: resentful of male.	TO: when male or female's emotional security is threatened, they attack each other through anger and defensiveness in order to protect their vulnerability of being insecure.
CR: strategy is to "attack and win."	CR: defensiveness is used to hurt male, make him so weak he will stop arguing with female.	TO: suppression of feelings.
CR: if wife really loved him she would do what she said.	TO: fear of abandonment.	TO: male and female not yet able to give up insecurities, unable to develop new interactional cycle.
	TO: unable to forgive.	TO: male and female remain emotionally disengaged from each other.
	CR: if husband really loved her he would trust her.	CR: couple feels their sense of security being threatened and their defenses want to go up when they argue.

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Table 1c

Results of Content Analysis of Softening Descriptions for Case #1

Male	Female	Couple
CR: biggest worry about starting over was that female would not like him for who she saw now.	CR: biggest worry was that male would tell her that he could not take it anymore.	CR: stated that they had strong emotions of fear regarding people in their family leaving or giving up on the other.
CR: mostly felt scared and out of control when the female was in treatment, but was hopeful about	CR: worried about letting go of the past.	TO: more hopeful about the future.

understanding what treatment was about.		
CR: wife was more relaxed in the interaction and that made a big difference.	TO: wife is learning to relax.	CR: stated that they had a good argument.
TO: male is noticing change.	CR: male is helpful in her process of recovery because he is letting her work at her own pace.	CR: able to keep their emotions from getting out of control.
CR: the fact that the female has been able to focus on something for four months is amazing in itself, whereas in the past she would have been ready to quit after four hours.	CR: female told male, "that is so nice of you."	CR: knowing how they worked was helpful in slowing things down.
CR: believes the couple's perceptions have changed.	CR: the sun is rising on nothing that the couple cannot tackle together.	CR: they could understand how each other was reacting in defense of vulnerabilities rather than purposely attacking partner.
CR: stated that the one thing he has not yet told female is, "I am sorry."		CR: feel they are getting used to the changes they have made.
CR: told female that he forgave her.		TO: defense management.
CR: the sun is setting on having no communication in the relationship and is rising on having open communication.		TO: more flexibility in emotions (2).
		TO: recognition of vulnerabilities.
		CR: know change has happened because they are able to take action now when they feel the intensity in their emotions rise instead of ignoring or overacting.
		TO: have learned to accept their own and their partner's vulnerabilities.
		TO: able to see changes
		TO: more responsive rather than reactive as their emotions are evoked in the relationship.
		TO: feel they have grown away from fears of abandonment.
		TO: learning to forgive.
		TO: recognizing old cycle more quickly.
		TO: avoiding attacking vulnerabilities.
		TO: able to more quickly identify and accept one another's vulnerabilities (2).
		TO: moved more quickly to positive interaction, communication, and conflict resolution.
		TO: ready to take on any problem as a team.

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Case 2. The second case analyzed for defensive and softening descriptions involved an unmarried couple. The therapist identified the presenting problem at the beginning of therapy on the termination form for this case. The therapist stated that the couple was concerned about their patterns and levels of intensity during fights, especially during the female's depression. The couple attended a total of 16 sessions. The therapist was a master's level marriage and family intern who was supervised by a clinical faculty member. Upon successful completion of therapy, the couple reported that they felt they had improved the relationship through understanding why they react to each other and by realizing the many options to dealing with various situations that would have normally led to an emotionally draining fight. Table 2a provides a brief overview of each partner's perceptions of the presenting problem before therapy.

Table 2a

Background Information for Case #2

Case	2	2
Gender	Male	Female
Years married	Not married	Not married
Times married before	0	0
Children	0	0
Reasons for seeking services	Relationship Enrichment	Personal enrichment Relationship enrichment
How serious is the problem right now?	Slightly Serious	Moderately Serious
How likely is the problem to change?	Moderately Likely	Not at all Likely

A total of 23 descriptions of defensiveness and 13 descriptions of softening were identified and recorded on the coding chart during content analysis. Table 2b and Table 2c provide a summary of the findings. Over the course of therapy a clear shift in defensiveness to softening descriptions was observed by the researchers. In sessions 1-6 there were 21 descriptions of defensiveness identified and no indicators of softening. In sessions 7-14 there were 3 defensive descriptions recorded and 13 softening descriptions identified during the content analysis. Session summaries for sessions 15 and 16 were not available for content analysis.

Table 2b

Results of Content Analysis of Defensive Descriptions for Case #2

Male	Female	Couple
TO: feels guilty.	TO: uses depression to remove blame from herself onto male.	TO: game playing.
TO: pursues.	TO: gets more upset if male cannot understand.	TO: couple uses intense emotion to connect with one another.
CR: during fights, female has said some very hurtful things.	TO: female rarely cries.	TO: cannot correctly interpret each other's messages over the phone because of the meaning each has attached to the way their partner's voice sounds.
CR: feels blamed (2).	TO: female hurt if male does not fix things.	
CR: cries during fights.	CR: protects pain and security during fights.	
CR: rescues female from sadness.	CR: reluctant to be assertive and clear (2).	
CR: protects self worth during fights.	CR: her opinions may not be accepted or appealing to other people.	
CR: female is unclear about what she wants him to do.	TO: gains power by having symptoms.	
CR: afraid of making the wrong decision.	TO: feels powerless if male does not respond to her symptoms.	
CR: biggest fear in not helping female was that she would be mad at him and stay mad.		

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Table 2c

Results of Content Analysis of Softening Descriptions for Case #2

Male	Female	Couple
CR: sees female give more signals that enable him to take more risks.	CR: able to be understanding of his depression.	TO: male can have depression and female can be there for male.
CR: female has been sharing more with him.	CR: able to be there for him while he dealt with the depression.	TO: after seeing how couple gets stuck in their cycle, couple has learned to give each other what each of them needs in less rigid ways.
CR: female is more supportive of what he says or does.	CR: sees male being open and interested in things that she says, helping to increase her level of trust.	CR: working together more to see positive outcomes in their relationship.
CR: realizing the female is in a bad mood and may not want his help.	CR: male not helping every time she is upset is alright.	TO: couple agrees working together works best.
CR: agreed that he should not be solely responsible for female's moods or "fixing" female's depression.		

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Case 3. The third case examined during content analysis involved a couple who had been married for a little over one year. The therapist stated on the termination form that at the beginning of therapy, the couple reported that a recent argument had escalated to mild forms of violence. The therapist reported that the couple wanted to learn something that would benefit them both as individuals and as a marital unit. The therapist met with this couple for a total of 12 sessions. The therapist was a master's level marriage and family therapist intern who was supervised by a clinical faculty member. Upon completion of therapy goals, the couple reported an ability to resolve conflicts. Table 3a

provides information regarding each partner's perception of the presenting problem before beginning couples treatment.

Table 3a

Background Information for Case #3

Case	3	3
Gender	Male	Female
Years married	1	1
Times married before	3	1
Children	3 (different residences)	1 (lives in different household/country)
Reasons for seeking services	Personal Enrichment Relationship Enrichment Marital Enrichment Family Stress	Marital enrichment
How serious is the problem right now?	Moderately Serious	Not at all serious
How likely is the problem to change?	Very likely	Very likely

Of the twelve session summaries that were analyzed for this case, 28 defensive descriptions were recorded on a coding chart during content analysis. The results are provided in Table 3b. Twenty-eight softening descriptions were identified and recorded on a coding chart and the results are listed in Table 3c. Over the twelve sessions of couples therapy, as the number and frequency of defensiveness descriptions decreased, the number and frequency of softening descriptions increased. For sessions 1-6, there were 16 descriptions of defensiveness recorded by the researchers and no descriptions of softening. For sessions 7-12 there were 9 descriptions of defensiveness and 28 descriptions of softening.

Table 3b

Results of Content Analysis of Defensive Descriptions for Case #3

Male	Female	Couple
TO: pursues.	TO: withdraws.	TO: unawareness of spousal roles, leading to symmetrical arguments to gain control.
TO: feels unacknowledged (2).	TO: feels unappreciated and mistrusted (2).	TO: couple fights escalate as each attempts to gain validation.
TO: feels wife is clever and wants things she does not say.	TO: struggles for equality.	TO: when husband begins a discussion, wife feels attacked; the fights escalate and do not become resolved.
TO: pushes for dominance.	TO: struggles for her sense of autonomy, stimulating a greater sense of inferiority in husband.	TO: both feel the other tries to control each other.
TO: feels validated when he has a sense of authority.	CR: feeling the need to defend herself as a person.	TO: escalating cycle of defensiveness and frustration.
TO: pursues wife to gain control of situation.	TO: wife distances as a self-preserving mechanism and does not build connection.	TO: wife interprets husband's education as threatening and defends her sense of equality, pushing husband away, raising his need for validation.
TO: husband pursues wife and requests help, then discredits.	CR: argument escalated to wife protecting self.	CR: both agreed they lacked commitment and security.
CR: argument escalated to husband complaining or bitching.	TO: fight for emotional security.	TO: couple is unable to adequately address emotions.
TO: fight for power.		CR: triggers include husband being tired, worried and stressed and wife being resistant and disagreeable.

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Table 3c

Results of Content Analysis for Softening Descriptions for Case #3

Male	Female	Couple
CR: giving more patience.	CR: increased feelings of appreciation.	CR: improved conflict resolution.
CR: feeling like the dialogue was easier between the two of them.	CR: more reassuring and supportive in reminding husband of his work towards his goals.	CR: increase in marital satisfaction.
CR: staying focused on his goals.	CR: feeling more respected, listened to, and like an equal.	TO: decreased reactivity and increased compromise.
CR: reported not understanding how wife felt.	CR: reported husband needing help understanding feelings because of his past.	TO: couple easing pursue/distance patterns.
CR: having more confidence in the relationship.	CR: giving husband more time.	TO: pursue/distance avoided and conflicts resolved.
CR: having patience to help relationship.	CR: being more patient and nice to help relationship.	
TO: feels more connection.	TO: addresses problems when	

	emotionally prepared.	
TO: allows wife to distance (2).	TO: able to consider husband's need of validation.	
TO: intends to keep argument from escalating by allowing distance when wife is not ready for conversation.	TO: intends to keep the discussion from escalating by readdressing the issue with husband.	
TO: feels at ease and loved.	TO: interprets husband's behaviors as respectful.	
TO: attempting to build connection.	TO: feels connected, loved and equally and reciprocates by validating husband.	

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Case 4. The fourth case examined for defensive and softening descriptions involved a couple who initially presented with family problems. The therapists stated on the termination report that the family reported a high level of stress in their relationships and emotional reactivity. The parents reported constant conflict and fighting among family members. The parents reported that they were dissatisfied with their roles and they wanted to be more connected as a couple. Three of the 26 sessions for this case were family sessions with the couple's three children attending these sessions. The couple attended the remaining 23 sessions as a means to unify the parental subsystem and realign the hierarchy within the family. Cycle work was used by the two therapists for this case in creating a new cycle for parenting and to increase couple connection. The therapists were master's level marriage and family therapist interns and were supervised by a clinical faculty member. Sessions 1-18 consisted of a co-therapy team. Sessions 19-26 were conducted by one of the therapists from the co-therapy team. Table 4a provides a summary of the each parent's perspective of the presenting problem at the beginning of therapy.

Table 4a

Background Information for Case #4

Case	4	4
Gender	Male	Female
Years married	20	20
Times married before	0	0
Children	3	3
Reasons for seeking services	Marital Enrichment Family Enrichment Family Conflict Parenting-two parent family Child behavior problems Adolescent behavior problems Family stress	Personal Enrichment Relationship Enrichment Family Enrichment Family Conflict Adolescent Behavior problems Family Stress
How serious is the problem right now?	Very serious	Very serious
How likely is the problem to change?	Moderately likely	Slightly likely

The 26 session summaries completed for this case were analyzed for descriptions of defensiveness and softening for the couple subsystem. Findings were recorded on coding charts. A total of 37 descriptions of defensiveness were recorded and 48 descriptions of softening were identified and are listed in Table 4b and Table 4c. There was a shift in the number of defensive descriptions and softening descriptions recorded from each session summary across the course of therapy. For sessions 1-13, there were 26 defensive descriptions recorded and 11 softening descriptions. For sessions 14-26, there were 14 defensive descriptions observed and 34 softening descriptions.

Table 4b

Results of Content Analysis of Defensive Descriptions for Case #4

Male	Female	Couple
TO: distant and steps in to enforce rules.	TO: primary communicator between children and father.	CR: emotionally reactive.
TO: seeks control and connection through enforcing the rules.	TO: seeks connection with children through setting rules.	CR: not united
TO: father fears losing connection and competency as the protector. CR: feels blamed.	TO: fears losing connection and not being important. CR: feels husband was not a parent, but a distant solid stone.	CR: had inconsistency in determination to keep rule. TO: each partner seeks connection with the other through conversation but does not feel the other is attentive to what they are sharing.
CR: agreed he was a distant enforcer.	TO: wife pushed him away.	TO: misinterpretations of spouse's inattention due to vulnerabilities established in cognitive maps at the beginning of relationship.
TO: husband is not a parent.	TO: fears losing family members.	CR: inability to stop defending their old positions.
TO: feels hurt because of lack of involvement in the family.	TO: pushed husband away for fear of losing control and stability in the family.	CR: clients discussion escalated in defense of their old positions.
TO: distances for fear of being hurt by rebukes.	CR: mistrusts her husband and does not believe he will be an active partner because he has been an absent stone for so long.	
CR: he does make efforts not to be the absent stone, but feels unappreciated.	CR: I let the children get away with murder and did not let my husband help.	
CR: I gave up on the family and didn't participate.	TO: wants to leave.	
TO: has to prove he will be there in the future.	TO: needs to use "we."	
CR: I came and rescued again and she pushed me away.	CR: he was a referee again.	
CR: I would rather tell her something that will keep us from arguing.	CR: I wish he would be honest and tell it like it is.	
CR: when wife is tired she distances and does not want to be around anyone.	CR: does not think husband would support her if she wanted to move.	
CR: I am not 100% straightforward with her.	CR: It's miserable not being able to trust, but my husband is the one person that could hurt me like I was hurt when I was younger.	

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Table 4c

Results of Content Analysis of Softening Descriptions for Case #4

Male	Female	Couple
CR: expressed feeling hurt when his wife pushed him away.	CR: acknowledged her role in pushing husband away.	CR: a unified team would have close physical proximity, agreement on standards, disagreement in private, support for each other, same dialogue, controlled temper, and time together.
CR: wife was supportive and discussed and negotiated decisions with him.	CR: expressed feeling the need to control her children because of her fear of loss.	CR: noticing their partner's new behaviors.
CR: felt listened to.	CR: she knew her husband would be there if she asked him.	TO: husband was an active partner and wife was an active supporter.
CR: the most important thing would be to not give in to the other.	CR: felt she could trust her husband to be there when she needed him.	CR: gave examples of when they negotiated, discussed, listened, prioritized, respected, and trusted each other.
CR: stated that his wife is nurturing and caring.	CR: was able to give herself space and not depend on her husband for everything.	TO: no blame or defending.
CR: reported that he misses female.	CR: most important thing would be to consider the other's position.	TO: parents initiated new cycle.
CR: knows what wife is talking about and understands how it has affected her ability to trust others.	CR: stated that husband's strength was remaining calm and he is able to reason with the kids.	CR: able to reevaluate their actions and consider the impacts of family interactions.
CR: he tries to give her opportunities to reach out and trust him.	CR: stated that she did not know that he missed her.	TO: couple exhibited softening.
CR: believes because they are not quitters they have been able to get past several things in their relationship that were "make or break" issues in their marriage.	CR: stated that she misses male too.	TO: couple engaged in extended eye contact and both smiled.
CR: believes they can get past anything now.	TO: female was surprised that male missed her at his new job.	CR: both – I want to be more as one with spouse.
CR: wife has included him more.	TO: increased eye contact.	CR: agreed they both felt heard during the discussion.
CR: feels like they are life long partners now rather than wife being the "queen bee."	TO: touched male on the arm to let him know she was surprised.	CR: identified tools used in discussion as being able to directly ask partner to be honest, identifying core issues, not getting reactive, listening to their partner, and discussing the problem without distractions/interruptions.
CR: we are life partners and just being in the same room even if we are doing something different feels good.	CR: they have been able to get past those times because they have lots of love.	TO: couple experienced a breakthrough and increased couple connection through each partner risking and doing something different while resolving a conflict.
	CR: husband has included her	CR: agreed they were both able

	more in his life.	to get their point across without getting reactive.
	CR: she can count on him to be there.	CR: explored barriers blocking an increase in trust leading to an increase in connection.
	CR: it feels good to be partners.	CR: identified ways to increase trust level.
		CR: very confident they can count on their partner to do what they say they are going to do.
		CR: in the past they were two individuals living in the same house and now they are partners.
		TO: couple has maintained changes and new, positive interactional cycle is solidified leading to an increase in connection and empowering couple to remain as a parental team.

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Case 5. This case involved a couple who reported fighting a lot as their presenting problem at the beginning of therapy. The therapists stated on the termination form that the couple reported that during arguments the female threatens to divorce the male. The couple wanted to improve communication skills and to increase understanding. The couple attended 18 couples therapy sessions. The therapists for this case were two master's level marriage and family therapist interns and were supervised by a clinical faculty member. The co-therapists for this case used cycle work. At the end of therapy the couple reported that since coming to therapy they are able to understand one another better and they do not become as defensive. Table 5a provides a description of each partner's view of the presenting problem at the beginning of therapy.

Table 5a

Background Information for Case #5

Case	5	5
Gender	Male	Female
Years married	2	2
Times married before	0	blank
Children	1	1
Reasons for seeking services	Personal enrichment Marital enrichment Family enrichment Marital conflict Family Stress	Marital enrichment Family enrichment Marital conflict Sexual problems Family Stress
How serious is the problem right now?	Moderately serious	Very Serious
How likely is the problem to change?	Very likely	Moderately Likely

Thirty-eight descriptions of defensiveness were recorded on a coding chart during content analysis of the 18 session summaries written for this case. In addition, 25 descriptions of softening were recorded on coding charts. Table 5b and 5c show the results of these analyses. Over the course of therapy the number of defensiveness descriptions decreased and the number of softening descriptions increased. For sessions 1-9, a total of 26 defensiveness descriptions and 10 softening descriptions were identified. For sessions 10-18, there were 12 defensiveness descriptions and 15 softening descriptions were recorded.

Table 5b

Results of Content Analysis of Defensive Descriptions for Case #5

Male	Female	Couple
CR: feels attacked and the need to defend his family.	CR: feels like she has no emotional support and is not appreciated.	TO: comments escalate leading to threats and finally female walks away.
TO: feels like he is not good enough (2) and defends himself.	TO: feels unappreciated and isolated therefore she puts him down.	CR: the filter that inhibits conversation the most is the inconsistency in the non-verbals such as attitude, eye rolling, and lack of attention.

TO: responds with a comment to defend himself.	TO: makes rude comment because she is not feeling appreciated triggering male's vulnerability of not being good enough.	CR: couple reported that rude comments still occur.
CR: felt he isn't listened to and desires to get his point across.	CR: feels attacked at times.	TO: female's recognition of unmet needs triggered vulnerabilities of not being appreciated and validated, which triggered the male's vulnerabilities of feeling not good enough and not being accepted.
TO: uses humor to diffuse intensity.	CR: uses silence to emphasize importance of conversation.	CR: male stated he thinks that in some way they both take pleasure in hurting their partner.
CR: male stated that reactivity increases when female first comments.	TO: fights can escalate to threats of divorce by female.	
CR: reported having long statements to get his point across.	CR: female stated that reactivity increases when male attempts to get his point across.	
CR: he talks in a structured manner, like talking to a child.	CR: makes comments that are perceived as snotty.	
TO: exhibited low levels of reactivity.	CR: rolls her eyes.	
CR: has avoided some issues because he does not know how to state them effectively without starting a fight.	CR: has a condescending tone.	
CR: feeling angry and unappreciated for all the work he contributes to the family.	TO: exhibited high levels of reactivity.	
CR: his response made the female feel unappreciated.	CR: stated that male did not care, he was not happy, he was not sad.	
CR: he gives up attempts to change, because he is afraid that once change occurs, his wife will want more change from him.	CR: rude comments still occurring and she would like that to be changed.	
CR: he tries to change but he cannot change fast enough or his efforts go unnoticed.	CR: feeling overwhelmed that things are never going to change.	
	CR: did not acknowledge her partner's vulnerabilities in the argument.	
	CR: stated that the husband has never followed through on his changes, so husband does not know what would happen.	
	CR: reported that the reason why she continues to engage in the cycle is because it is comfortable.	
	CR: she is pushing the male away because she has too much to lose.	

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Table 5c

Results of Content Analysis of Softening Descriptions for Case #5

Male	Female	Couple
CR: had heightened awareness of reactivity.	CR: felt unloved, confused, mad, misunderstood, and unimportant.	CR: reported increased awareness of intense situations.
CR: stated that female was feeling unloved, misunderstood, alone, and angry.	CR: she felt more appreciated during the week.	CR: both reported feeling appreciated when the other performed their pleasant surprise.
CR: male stated that he felt angry and misunderstood.	CR: she listens to what the male has to say, and tries to understand his perspective.	TO: pleasant surprise enabled the couple to recognize the other's perspective helping each to feel more appreciated leading to increased connection.
CR: tried to understand the emotions associated with wife's negative comments.	CR: since they were able to understand one another's perspective better, she was able to keep her defenses down and communicate in a more effective manner.	CR: couple stated that they were consciously aware of what the other person's feelings were when messages were delivered in order to stop filters from prohibiting a message from getting across.
CR: he thought of wife's feelings.		TO: both recognize that they are protecting themselves and that one another's behaviors trigger their own vulnerabilities.
CR: he appreciated female's honesty.		TO: as each individual is able to understand their partner's needs, vulnerabilities are not triggered allowing for resolution of the issue.
CR: he tried to think about female's perspective before he spoke.		TO: as an alternative to engaging in their negative interactional cycle, writing letters to one another enabled the couple to keep reactivity levels down, get their point across, and understand one another's perspective better.
CR: male stated that he has been thinking about why female is feeling the way she is.		CR: female stated that the conversations have allowed each individual to understand one another better, male agreed.
CR: male stated that he stops to think about why the female says or feels the way she does.		CR: couple stated that they are thinking about what they say before they say it.
CR: if the female makes a rude comment or snaps at him during a conversation, he will stop and think about what she might be feeling that leads to her reactivity, acknowledges the emotions, and clarifies points that could have been misunderstood.		CR: since their communication skills are better they are less reactive to one another.
		TO: couple is thinking of one another's feelings and perspectives while engaging in conversations leading to more satisfying interactions and a higher level of connection.

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation * No number in parentheses indicates observations made one time.

Case #6. The couple in this case identified difficulty with resolving conflict as the presenting problem. The therapist stated on the termination report for this case that the couple reported that they wanted to learn ways to handle conflict and anger before they got married. A master's-level marriage and family therapist intern who was supervised by a clinical faculty member was the therapist for the total of 8 sessions of couples therapy. At the end of therapy, the therapist reported that there was an increase in each partner's ability to take the other's perspective, an increase in connection, and improved communication. Table 6a provides a concise description of each client's view of the presenting problem at the beginning of therapy.

Table 6a

Background Information for Case #6

Case	6	6
Gender	Male	Female
Years married	Not married	Not married
Times married before	Blank	0
Children	0	Pregnant
Reasons for seeking services	Relationship Enrichment Marital conflict	Personal enrichment Relationship enrichment Marital enrichment Family enrichment Marital conflict Parenting-two parent family Anger management
How serious is the problem right now?	Moderately serious	Moderately serious
How likely is the problem to change?	Very likely	Very likely

The 8 session summaries completed for each session were examined for descriptions of defensiveness and softening. The findings were recording on coding charts. A total of 20 descriptions of defensiveness were recorded from the session summaries (Table 6b) and 13 descriptions of softening were identified (Table 6c). As therapy continued the number of defensive descriptions decreased and the number of softening descriptions increased. The 20 defensiveness descriptions were identified in the case summaries written for sessions 1-4. One softening description was identified from the case summaries for sessions 1-4. The remaining 12 softening descriptions were identified from the summaries written for sessions 5-8.

Table 6b

Results of Content Analysis of Defensive Descriptions for Case #6

Male	Female	Couple
CR: does not know how to react to female's anger.	CR: I have a short temper.	TO: couple is stuck in negative pursuer/distancer interactional cycle leading to reactivity thus couple is not able to resolve conflict effectively.
CR: analyzed everything female says.	CR: I yell and he just sits there.	TO: female withholds connection from male to protect vulnerability leading to husband's being left out, and not as connected to his partner as he would like to be.
TO: male attempts to calm partner down to avoid conflict.	CR: cannot control anger.	TO: pursuer/distancer cycle switches between partners.
CR: there are times he feels apathetic.	CR: brings up things from the past.	TO: male avoids conflict when female questions why something was not done to protect vulnerability of not being good enough.
CR: what keeps his partner maintaining her position is her previous experience of not feeling listened to.	CR: female is reactive and defensive to protect her vulnerability (fear of being hurt by her partner).	TO: female pursues male to fulfill her need to feel important triggering male's vulnerability of incompetence resulting in male's distancing.
CR: when female continues to ask male why something wasn't done or reiterates her view, he eventually feels like she thinks he	CR: if she is in a bad mood she reacts if things aren't done around the house.	

is stupid.		
	CR: agreed with male's statement, reported that when she does not think her partner is listening, she feels like her thoughts and feelings have not been heard.	
	CR: male continues to defend his position in the cycle because he wants to feel like his partner has heard him and believes he knows what he is talking about.	
	CR: when male continues to give female reasons for why something was done, female feels as if male isn't listening.	

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Table 6c

Results of Content Analysis of Softening Descriptions for Case #6

Male	Female	Couple
CR: he felt his partner listened to his ideas and responded more specifically to them.	CR: felt her partner listened and responded to her specific concerns.	TO: beginning to move from blaming their partner and stated their feelings using "I" statements.
CR: female has been more open-minded and clarified her questions.	CR: was able to understand male's point of view and she felt she had been heard.	CR: we have a greater understanding of each other's perspective.
CR: able to acknowledge female's feelings and this is second nature to him now.	CR: becoming less reactive.	TO: exhibited an increase in perspective taking.
	CR: felt male would support her.	CR: agreed they feel confident that their positive cycle is solidified.
	CR: realized male's intention was not negative and she was able to realize this before reacting.	
	CR: feels listened to and appreciated.	

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Case #7. The seventh and final case analyzed for defensive and softening descriptions involved a couple who reported that they were not able to resolve many of their differences. The couple attended a total of 7 couples therapy sessions. The therapist for this case was a master's level marriage and family therapy intern who was supervised by a clinical faculty member. The therapist recorded on the termination report that the couple reported that identifying their negative interactional cycle aided them in being more understanding and sensitive to their partner's needs and desires. Table 7a provides a brief overview of each partner's perspective of the problem at the beginning of therapy.

Table 7a

Background Information for Case #7

Case	1	7
Gender	Male	Female
Years married	1	1
Times married before	0	0
Children	1 (step)	1 (previous relationship)
Reasons for seeking services	Relationship enrichment Marital enrichment Step-parenting	Marital enrichment Step-parenting
How serious is the problem right now?	Moderately serious	Slightly serious
How likely is the problem to change?	Moderately likely	Slightly likely

The 7 session summaries completed for each couples therapy session were analyzed for indicators of defensiveness and softening. Findings were recorded on the coding charts. Table 7b and Table 7c provide a list of 7 defensive descriptions and 15 softening descriptions found in the session summaries for this case. Across the course of therapy, as the number of defensive descriptions identified decreased, the number of softening descriptions increased. Five of the defensive descriptions and 5 of the softening descriptions were identified in the session summaries for sessions 1-4. For sessions 5-7 there were 2 defensive descriptions identified and 10 softening descriptions.

Table 7b

Results of Content Analysis of Defensive Descriptions for Case #7

Male	Female	Couple
TO: male distances by doing more stuff outside the home.	TO: pursues male when trying to control his activities.	CR: (both) thought the other resented the changes they had had to make since getting married.
CR: put female in a bind when he asked her to trust him but then did not follow through when she did trust him.	TO: challenges male's promise.	
	TO: leaves (physically or mentally).	
	CR: put male in a bind because while she wanted him to become more involved in the family, she criticized him when he made an effort to do so.	

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

*Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Table 7c

Results of Content Analysis for Softening Descriptions for Case #7

Male	Female	Couple
CR: likes how they work as a team and support each other regardless of personal feelings.	CR: identified friendship, companionship, talking, and honesty as things she would like to keep in the relationship.	CR: agreed they had already started to learn from each other as they are both teachable individuals.
TO: softened when female spoke of how hurt she had been by her family's consistent disrespect of her.	CR: could see how his situation from his past was affecting him currently in his drive to succeed and have pride in his work.	CR/TO: in understanding the other's vulnerabilities and where they came from, and how they had been so useful in the past, the couple more easily softened toward each other and are more sympathetic to who their partner is.
TO: softened toward female's need to be a priority.	TO: enrolled in school, signifying her trust in male as a father.	TO: each soothed other's vulnerabilities throughout the week.
CR: he knew she liked it because she told him and seemed more relaxed.	CR: knew male liked it because he told her and acknowledged that he needed her.	TO: considering each other's perspective lessens reactivity.
CR: said he was better at listening to her needs in therapy and then adjusting to meet them better at home.	CR: if things get bad, she can fall back on her ability to consider his perspective and the bigger picture.	
CR: if things get bad, he can realize that they are different and agree to disagree while he tries to consider her perspective.		

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation *Number in parenthesis indicates number of times noted in case summaries. No number indicates observations made one time.

Across-Case Summaries for Defensiveness and Softening Descriptions

The process involved in this study included starting with the abstract concepts of defensiveness and softening, looking for specific indicators taken from session summaries written for successful couples therapy, and then organizing these descriptions into themes. After the content analysis was conducted for the seven cases, the researchers examined the results for emerging themes from the lists of phrases describing defensiveness and softening. Phrases were highlighted from the coding chart for each case. Defensiveness phrases were compiled into one list for each case. Softening phrases were assembled into a separate list for each case. Next, phrases from the lists of defensiveness descriptions and softening indicators that were similar were grouped together as a means for finding themes among all the cases.

Six identified themes related to defensiveness included the descriptions of protecting self, fears, emotions/reactivity, power/control, non-verbal, and interactions (see Table 8). Six identified themes relative to softening included the descriptions of insight/understanding, decreased reactivity, non-verbal, perspective, addressing fears, and experiencing progress (see Table 9). The theme names were developed after the data were reviewed. Many of the theme names were informed by the concepts discussed in the literature relative to defensiveness and softening while other theme names appear to be somewhat unique to ideas of defensiveness and softening.

Table 8

Identified Themes from Defensiveness Descriptions Content Analysis Results

Theme	Defensiveness Descriptions
Protecting Self	Defensiveness to protect vulnerability Sense of security threatened Protects self-worth Protects pain and security during couple fights Feeling need to defend self as a person Defends sense of equality pushing partner away, raising partner's need for validation Distances as a self-preserving mechanism Inability to stop defending their old positions Defense of old positions Feels need to defend family Responds with comment to partner to defend self Avoids conflict
Fears	Fear of (includes: abandonment, losing connection, incompetent, not important, not good enough) Insecurity Each attempts to gain validation Interprets other's education as threatening Lack commitment and security Fight for emotional security Does not think partner would support Both thought other resented the changes they had to make since getting married
Emotions/ Reactivity	Resentfulness Suppression of feelings Emotionally disengaged More easily agitated Feels unacknowledged Feels unappreciated and mistrusted Feels attacked Unable to adequately address emotions Emotionally reactive Feeling blamed Feeling alienated Feels other is inattentive to what they are sharing Feels no emotional support Feels unappreciated and isolated Doesn't feel good enough Feeling angry Feeling overwhelmed that things will never change Feels efforts go unnoticed Does not know how to react to partner's anger Has short temper Feels left out Feels like partner thinks he/she is stupid Feels as if partner is not listening Makes rude comment

Table 8 Continued

Theme	Defensiveness Descriptions
Power/ Control	Both feel other tries to control each other Pursues partner to gain control of the situation Game playing Pushes for dominance Struggles for equality Symmetrical arguments to gain control Fight for power Couple seeks control and connection Puts partner down Pursues partner by trying to control his/her activities Brings up things from the past Challenges partner's promises Leaves physically or mentally Put each other in binds
Non-verbal	Eye rolling Lack of attention
Interactions	Negative cycle and behaviors Cannot correctly interpret each other's messages Partner is clever, wants things they do not say Blaming Pursues Withdraws Fights escalate, unresolved Escalating cycle of defensiveness and frustration Partner discredits Partner is distant Unawareness of spousal roles Stuck in distinct roles Dissatisfaction with their positions Triggers partner's vulnerability Comments escalate to threats, partner walks away Uses humor to diffuse intensity Uses silence to emphasize importance of conversation Stuck in negative interactional cycle leading to reactivity

Table 9

Identified Themes from Softening Descriptions Content Analysis Results

Theme	Softening Descriptions
Insight/ understanding	<p>Identified fear/worries with partner present Knowing how they worked was helpful in slowing things down Understand how other was reacting Recognition of vulnerabilities Accept own/partner's vulnerabilities Recognize old negative cycle Understanding partner Being there for partner Seeing how they get stuck in old cycle Didn't realize before how partner felt Admitted needing help understanding other's feelings because of past Identified triggers for defensiveness Identified tools such as directly asking partner to be honest, identifying core issues, not getting reactive, and listening to partner. Knows what partner is talking about and understands how it has affected partner's ability to trust others Explored barriers blocking an increase in trust Identified ways to increase trust level Increased awareness Heightened awareness of reactivity Identified self/partner's feelings/fears Tried to understand partner's emotions associated with partner's behaviors Able to understand their partner's needs Clarified questions Identified what each would like to keep in relationship Partner could see how other's past was affecting him/her Understand the other's vulnerabilities, where they came from and how they have been useful in the past</p>
Decreased Reactivity	<p>More relaxed Defense management More flexibility in emotions More responsive than reactive as emotions evoked Decreased reactivity More patience More reassuring More supportive Able to get point across without getting reactive Acknowledges emotion Keeps defenses down Felt male would support her More easily softened toward each other, more sympathetic to who their partner is</p>
Non-verbal	<p>Extended eye contact (over time) Smiled Increased eye contact (more frequently) Touched partner on the arm</p>

Table 9 continued

Theme	Softening Descriptions
<p>Perspective</p>	<p>Hopeful Couple's perceptions have changed More aware of other person's feelings Understand one another's perspective Tried to think about partner's perspective Has been thinking about why partner says/feels Each individual able to understand one another better Thinking of one another's feelings and perspective Able to understand partner's point of view Increase in perspective taking Can fall back on ability to consider other's perspective Considering other's perspective lessens reactivity Realize each is different and agree to disagree while considering other's perspective</p>
<p>Addressing Fears</p>	<p>Grown away from fears of abandonment Avoid attacking vulnerabilities Increased feelings of appreciation Each misses other and surprised that other partner felt that way Softened when partner spoke of how hurt they had been by family's consistent disrespect Softened toward partner's need to be a priority Soothed other's vulnerabilities</p>
<p>Experiencing Progress</p>	<p>Noticing change Getting use to changes Know change has happened Able to take action when they feel intensity in their emotions Learning to forgive, Forgiveness Expression of sorrow Learning to give what each other needs in less rigid ways Working together Sees partner being open and interested in things Increase in partner's level of trust More sharing with partner More supportive of what partner says/does Increased conflict resolution Increased marital satisfaction Increased compromise Feeling more respected, listened to and like an equal Couple easing pursue/distance patterns Couple experienced a breakthrough by each partner risking and doing something different while resolving a conflict Increased connection Addressing problems when emotionally prepared Able to consider other's need for validation Feels at ease and loved Allows other distance Validating partner Negotiated Listened Prioritized Respected Trusted Initiated new cycle Able to reevaluate actions and consider Identified partner's strengths</p>

Table 9 continued

Theme	Softening Descriptions
Experiencing Progress Continued	Both felt heard Can count on partner to be there Both feel included New interactional cycle solidified Thinking about what they say before they say it More satisfying interactions Moving away from blaming Felt partner had listened Able to acknowledge partner's feelings is second nature now Likes to work as a team Supporting each other regardless of personal feelings Better at listening to other's needs and adjusting to meet them

Across-Case Summaries for Transitions to Increased Softening

In each case a clear transition from defensiveness to softening can be identified. The researchers have provided a table for each case listing softening descriptions that appear to illustrate components of the transition process (see Tables 10-16). The purpose of these transition charts is to link observations made during the content analysis of session summaries to change over time. The researchers recognized that early phases of therapy had higher level of defensiveness descriptions and later stages had higher levels of softening descriptions. For this reason, the transition charts will list only the softening statements. During the middle phase of therapy, there was a noticeable shift in the quantity and frequency of defensiveness and softening descriptions. Phrases proposed to be components of this shift are listed in Tables 10-16. These descriptions are not new phrases taken from the session summaries, but are selected from the previously presented tables (see Tables 1b-7c) that reported the results of content analysis of defensive and softening descriptions.

The findings in this study suggest that softening is not only an event that can be a crucial turning point in therapy, but also a process that occurs during the therapeutic process. The researchers often observed that in the cases analyzed during the content analysis, transitions to increased observation of softening often occurred over a period of several sessions. These transitions may have not only included interactions between the couple and therapist in sessions of couples therapy, but also in the couple's interactions and individual experiences outside of session. These softening statements may not have been described in detail by the therapist. Therefore, the transitions may have occurred outside of session. If the transitions occurred outside of session, the couple may have not thought to share these changes with the therapist if the therapist did not probe for such information. It is important to note that in some cases softening observations may have occurred early and increased over time (see Table 10), while in other cases softening may not have been first observed until much later (see Table 11 or 12).

Table 10

Transition to Increased Softening Descriptions for Case #1

Session #	Male	Female	Couple
1			CR: stated that they had strong emotions of fear regarding people in their family leaving or giving up on the other.
4	CR: biggest worry about starting over was that the female would not like him for who she saw now.	CR: biggest worry was that male would tell her that he could not take it anymore.	
4		CR: worried about letting go of the past.	
5	CR: mostly felt scared and out of control when female was in treatment, but was hopeful about understanding what treatment was about.	CR: male was more scared than she was because male had more time to think about the situation.	
6			TO: more hopeful about the future.
10	CR: wife was more relaxed in the interaction and that made a big difference.		CR: stated that they had a good argument.
12	TO: male is noticing change.	TO: learning to relax.	CR: able to keep their emotions from getting out of control.

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

Table 11

Transition to Increased Softening Descriptions for Case #2

Session #	Male	Female	Couple
7		CR: able to be understanding of his depression.	TO: male can have depression and female can be there for male.
7		CR: able to be there for him while he dealt with the depression.	TO: after seeing how couple gets stuck in their cycle, couple has learned to give each other what each of them needs in less rigid ways.
9	CR: sees female give more signals that enable him to be risky.	CR: sees male being open and interested in things that she says which have helped to increase her level of trust.	CR: working together more to see positive outcomes in their relationship.

9	CR: realizing the female is just in a bad mood and may not want his help.	CR: female stated that male not helping every time she is upset is all right.	
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*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

Table 12

Transition to Increased Softening Descriptions for Case #3

Session #	Male	Female	Couple
7		CR: increased feelings of appreciation.	CR: improved conflict resolution skills.
7			CR: increase in marital satisfaction.
7			TO: decreased reactivity and increased compromise.
8	CR: giving more patience.	CR: more reassuring and supportive in reminding male of his work towards his goals.	
8	CR: feeling like the dialogue was easier between the two of them.	CR: feeling more respected, listened to, and like an equal.	
10	CR: feels at ease and loved.		TO: couple easing pursue/distance patterns.
10	CR: reported not understanding how female felt.	CR: reported husband needing help of understanding feelings because of his past.	

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

Table 13

Transition to Increased Softening Descriptions for Case #4

Session #	Male	Female	Couple
6			CR: a unified team would have close physical proximity, agreement on standards, disagreement in private, support for each other, same dialogue, controlled temper, and time together.
9	CR: expressed feeling hurt when his wife pushed him away.	CR: acknowledged her role in pushing male away.	
9		CR: expressed feeling the need to control her children because of her fear of loss.	
11	CR: wife was supportive and discussed and negotiated decisions with him.	CR: reported she knew her husband would be there if she asked him to.	CR: noticing their partner's new behaviors.
11	CR: felt listened to.	CR: felt she could trust her husband to be there when she needed him.	TO: husband was an active partner and wife was an active supporter.

11		CR: was able to give herself space and not depend on male for everything.	
13	CR: most important thing would be to not give in to the other.	CR: most important thing would be to consider the other's position.	CR: gave examples of when they negotiated, discussed, listened, prioritized, respected, and trusted each other.
14			TO: reported no blame or defending.
15			TO: parents initiated new cycle.
16			CR: able to reevaluate their actions and consider the impacts of family interactions.
19	CR: stated his wife is nurturing and caring.	CR: female stated husband's strength was remaining calm and he is able to reason with the kids.	

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

Table 14

Transition to Increased Softening Descriptions for Case #5

Session #	Male	Female	Couple
2			CR: reported increased awareness of intense situations.
4	CR: had heightened awareness of reactivity.		
5	CR: stated that female was feeling unloved, misunderstood, alone, and angry.	CR: stated she felt unloved, confused, mad, misunderstood, and unimportant.	
5	CR: male stated that he felt angry and misunderstood.		
6	CR: tried to understand the emotions associated with wife's negative comments.		
7			CR: both reported feeling appreciated when the other performed their pleasant surprise.
7			TO: pleasant surprise enabled the couple to recognize the other's perspective helping each to feel more appreciated leading to increased connection.
8			CR: couple stated that they were consciously aware of what the other person's feelings were when messages were delivered in order to stop filters from prohibiting a message from getting across.
8			TO: both recognize that they are

			protecting themselves and that one another's behaviors trigger their own vulnerabilities.
10	CR: he thought of female's feelings.		CR: couple reported they were able to understand their partner's needs and compromise enabling them to come to an agreement.
10			TO: As each individual is able to understand their partner's needs, vulnerabilities are not triggered allowing for resolution of the issue.
14	CR: appreciated female's honesty.		TO: as an alternative to engaging in their negative interactional cycle, writing letters to one another enabled the couple to keep reactivity levels down, get their point across, and understand one another's perspective better.
16	CR: tried to think about female's perspective before he spoke.	CR: felt more appreciated during the week.	
17	CR: has been thinking about why female is feeling the way she is.		CR: female stated that the conversations have allowed each individual to understand one another better, male agreed.
17			CR: couple stated that they are thinking about what they say before they say it.

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

Table 15

Transition to Increased Softening Descriptions for Case #6

Session #	Male	Female	Couple
4			TO: beginning to move from blaming their partner to stating their feelings using "I" statements.
5	CR: he felt his partner listened to his ideas and responded more specifically to them.	CR: felt her partner listened and responded to her specific concerns.	
5		CR: was able to understand male's point of view and she felt she had been heard.	
5		CR: becoming less reactive.	
6	CR: female has been more open-minded and clarified her questions.	CR: felt male would support her.	CR: we have a greater understanding of each other's perspective.
6	CR: male reported he feels that he was able to acknowledge female's feelings and this is second nature to him now.	CR: female reported that she realized male's intention was not negative and she was able to realize this before reacting.	TO: exhibited an increase in perspective taking.

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

Table 16

Transition to Increased Softening Descriptions for Case #7

Session #	Male	Female	Couple
2	CR: likes how they work as a team and support each other regardless of personal feelings.	CR: identified friendship, companionship, talking, and honesty as things she'd like to keep.	CR: agreed that they had already started to learn from each other as they are both teachable individuals.
4		CR: could see how this situation from his past was affecting him currently in his drive to succeed and have pride in his work.	CR/TO: couple agreed that in understanding the other's vulnerabilities and where they came from, and how they had been so useful in the past, they could more easily softened toward each other and be more sympathetic to who their partner is.

*CR=client report, TO=therapist observation

Summary

The above tables represent snapshots of processes reported by clients and therapist observers. The attempt to move from specific possible indicators to being clustered by common themes was intended to allow future researchers to apply similar or other analytic techniques than used within this project. When possible, theme titles used in Tables 8 and 9 were taken from the literature review. Categories suggested by previous researchers were helpful in classifying observations (e.g. decreased reactivity, perspective, and addressing fears). At early stages of the variable conceptualization, it is best to use existing labels rather than create a new set for similar underlying constructs.

Discussion

This project found numerous examples of therapist observations and client behaviors that are potentially related to “softening.” The results of the content analysis conducted for each case yielded several examples that are congruent with definitions of softening found in current marriage and family therapy literature. All potential indicators of defensiveness and softening identified by the researchers were included in the findings, and descriptions associated with softening and the change process in couples therapy were recorded during the content analysis phase of this project. Because the study was exploratory and included all potential descriptions, the results offer evidence that softening is sometimes an event that becomes a crucial turning point in couples therapy, but softening is also a process that may occur outside of therapy sessions.

Application of Findings to Softening Discussions in the Literature

First, the results will be discussed in relation to the previous definitions of softening offered by the literature. As discussed in Chapter 1, Johnson and Greenberg (1988) suggested that softening is a “shift” from a negative interaction toward increased accessibility and responsiveness by a partner. Case 4 provides a picture of a shift from negative interaction to increased accessibility and responsiveness in couples therapy. At the beginning of therapy the therapist observed that the “parents are stuck in distinct roles that contribute to family member’s emotional reactivity and are dissatisfied with their positions.” The husband reported that he had been “feeling alienated from the family” and “hurt

because of lack of involvement in the family.” The wife reported that she felt her husband “was not a parent, but a distant solid stone” and that she “mistrusted her husband and does not believe he will be an active partner because he has been an absent stone for so long.” These descriptions of defensiveness from each partner describe each partner’s perspective of their negative interaction.

However, through the course of therapy, the couple experienced a shift from the consistent negative interaction they engaged in before coming to therapy to increased connection, accessibility, and responsiveness to their partner. For instance, midway through therapy, the husband expressed “feeling hurt when his wife pushed him away.” The wife then “expressed feeling the need to control her children because of her fear of loss.” Not only was each partner able to identify the vulnerabilities fueling their negative interaction patterns, but they did so in the presence of their partner. By expressing their hurts and fears to the other, the couple began to decrease their defensiveness, thus becoming more accessible to their partner. As one partner increased vulnerability, the other partner responded by becoming less reactive.

Johnson et al. (1999) offered that softening is a time when a previously critical partner expresses vulnerability and asks for comfort and connection. Case 3 provides an example of what this type of softening may look like in couples therapy. At the beginning of therapy the male reported that he feels “unacknowledged” and that his “wife is clever and wants things she doesn’t say.” The therapist for this case observed that the husband “pushes for dominance” and “feels validated when he has a sense of authority”; thus, he “pursues wife to

gain control of the situation.” In session 10 of this case, the husband reported “not understanding how wife felt.” The husband becomes vulnerable at this moment in therapy as he asks for understanding of his partner’s experience. The wife then responds that the husband “is needing help of understanding feelings because of his past.” According to Johnson et al. (1999), the softening occurred in the husband’s expression of vulnerability. However, the wife’s response to the husband’s expression of vulnerability is a significant component of the change process for this couple. The way in which the change process is punctuated influences the way softening of each partner is described. When breaking a whole process into smaller parts, forced punctuation often occurs. Researchers and clinicians must be careful because there can be a major qualitative difference between observation of one partner softening versus both partners softening versus softening in a relational encounter.

A third definition of softening is offered by Johnson and Williams-Keeler (1998) when they write that softening is when a hostile/pursuing partner accesses attachment needs/fears and asks for them to be met in a vulnerable manner - an event that can redefine that bond between partners. Case 7 provides an example of a previously pursuing partner accessing needs/fears and asking for them to be met in a vulnerable manner. The therapist had observed the wife in this case to be the pursuer in the relationship. The therapist reported that the wife “pursues the male when trying to control his activities.” At the beginning of therapy the therapist observed that the husband “distances by doing more stuff outside the home.” During the fifth session of couples therapy, the

wife “spoke of how hurt she had been by her family’s disrespect of her.”

Something in the way the wife shared her experience and hurt triggered the male to soften. The therapist observed that the husband “softened toward female’s need to be a priority.” The couple agreed that “understanding the other’s vulnerabilities and where they came from, and how they had been so useful in the past, they could more easily soften toward each other and be more sympathetic to who their partner is.”

Through their approach, Functional Family Therapists intent is to “facilitate the transition from skepticism, defensiveness and resentment to hope and enthusiasm” (Alexander & Parsons, 1982, p. 58). Case 1 involved a couple who seemed to be skeptical about the future of their relationship and family. The husband stated that “his biggest worry about starting over was that the female would not like him for who she saw now.” The wife reported that her “biggest worry was that the male would tell her that he could not take it anymore.” At the end of therapy the therapist observed that the couple was “ready to take on any problems as a team.” The shift from previous skepticism, defensiveness and resentment to hope and enthusiasm is captured in each partner’s summary of where they had arrived in therapy as a couple in their last session. The husband stated that the “sun is setting on having no communication in the relationship and is rising on having open communication.” The wife stated that “the sun is rising on nothing that the couple cannot tackle together.”

Emerging Themes

The themes that emerged from the lists of defensiveness and softening descriptions found during the content analysis of session summaries help categorize the findings as they relate to the literature reviewed in this study and to somewhat unique ideas associated with defensiveness and softening. The six identified themes related to defensiveness included the descriptions of protecting self, fears, emotions/reactivity, power/control, non-verbal, and interactions (see Table 8). Many of the theme names were taken from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

The theme of “Power and Control” evolved from the ideas offered by Waldron et al. (1997) on defensiveness, specifically when they define defensiveness as partners overtly controlling one another. Phrases such as “pushes for dominance,” “symmetrical arguments to gain control,” and “fight for power” describe interactions in which one or both partners is engaging in behaviors attempting to gain control and/or power over their partner. These types of behaviors often trigger defensiveness in the other partner or result from existing defensiveness in the partner who is engaging in the controlling behavior.

The theme of “Interactions” was selected to represent the idea that defensiveness is seen as circular and increasingly destructive ways of responding to a partner (Waldron et al., 1997). Descriptions identified in the content analysis such as “escalating cycle of defensiveness and frustration,” “stuck in negative interactional cycle leading to reactivity,” and “triggers partner’s vulnerability” focus on interactional sequences observed in session by therapists.

These interactions are described as keeping couples “stuck” in negative cycles (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). “In these cycles, the vulnerabilities and resentments evoked by the partners’ behavior and the ensuing attempts at self protection are the glue that keeps the couple stuck in the problematic pattern” (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988, p.86). Self protection often keeps partners locked in a defensive stance fueling the couple’s negative interactional cycle. Phrases including “defensiveness to protect vulnerability,” “protects pain and security during couple fights, and “defense of old positions” are examples from the findings that describe the theme of “Protecting Self.”

The theme of “Non-verbal” was used to categorize the non-verbal descriptions of defensive behaviors recorded by therapists on the session summaries. A partner’s defensiveness is often expressed nonverbally to the other partner and includes observations of nonverbal behavior such as, “eye rolling” and “lack of attention.” “Nonverbal expression is a channel for emotional experience, the spontaneous external communication of an internal state” (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). Descriptions of non-verbal indicators of defensiveness were included in the findings. The therapists for one of the cases included descriptions of non-verbal behavior in the case summaries written for that case.

New themes offered to categorize the descriptions of defensiveness were not directly found in the literature, but were intended to describe general concepts present in various studies related to negative interactional cycles. The theme of “Fears” evolved from discussions of vulnerabilities and protecting self

found in the work of Greenberg & Johnson (1988). Phrases such as “fear of abandonment,” “fear of losing connection, and “fear of not being good enough” describe the idea of defensiveness as an expression of underlying fears.

The theme of “Emotions/Reactivity” discussed throughout the literature (Greenberg & Johnson, 1986; Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Cordova et al., 1998) was chosen to represent ideas related to clients’ reports and therapists’ observations of emotional expression, feeling, and reactivity in session that are proposed indicators of defensiveness. Descriptions offered in the results section such as, “suppression of feelings, “emotionally disengaged,” “feels attacked,” and “emotionally reactive” are examples of the emotional component of defensiveness.

Six identified themes relative to softening included the descriptions of insight/understanding, decreased reactivity, non-verbal, perspective, addressing fears, and experiencing progress (see Table 9). Multiple indicators of softening were found that are congruent with what has been discussed in the literature about softening. The theme of “Insight/Understanding” is a component of the change process in couples therapy discussed throughout the literature. Christensen et al. (1998) identify a gain in insight as part of the cognitive aspect of the change process in couples therapy. Increasing emotional awareness (Croyle & Waltz, 2002; Johnson, 2003) is also a component of gaining insight into how one’s partner is experiencing emotions and the emotional experience of oneself. Phrases such as “increased awareness,” “able to understand partner’s needs,” and “understand other’s vulnerabilities, where they came from and how

they have been useful in the past” all provide examples of what increased insight/understanding looks like in session.

The theme of “Non-verbal” found in the proposed indicators of softening refers to the non-verbal aspect of change. Christensen et al. (1998) assert that a partner’s expression of affect is a key part of the change process. EFT researchers also suggest that nonverbal displays of affect and expression of emotions are key components of the change process (Greenberg & Johnson, 1986; Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994). Descriptions of non-verbal behaviors observed in session that are proposed to be indicators of softening included phrases such as “increased eye contact” and “touched partner on the arm.”

The theme of “Perspective” addressed ideas discussed in the literature regarding partners having a shift in perspective. Giblin (1996) describes empathy as actively taking a partner’s perspective. Christensen et al. (1998) found that changes in communication were a means for seeing things from their partner’s perspective by talking to their partner about what they were feeling. Statements including, “understand one another’s perspective,” “can fall back on ability to consider other’s perspective,” and “considering other’s perspective lessens reactivity” seem to describe an ability to take on the other’s perspective often leading to decreased defensiveness and reactivity. A transition from skepticism, defensiveness and resentment to hope and enthusiasm (Alexander & Parsons, 1982) seems to refer to a shift in perspective. The concept of second-order change also refers to a change in perspective (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003).

order change also refers to a change in perspective (Fournier, Briggs, & Hendrix, 2003).

The theme of “Addressing Fears” refers to what some researchers propose to be part of the softening process. Johnson and Williams-Keller (1998) suggest that when a partner softens, he or she accesses attachment needs or fears. Johnson et al. (1999) offer that softening occurs when a previous critical partner expresses vulnerability. This expression of vulnerability often involves a partner identifying or expressing their fears in the presence of his or her partner. For example, the description, “softened when partner spoke of how hurt they had been by family’s consistent disrespect” seems to be describing an interactional sequence in therapy in which one partner expressed family experiences in a vulnerable manner, allowing the other partner to “soften” his or her stance toward that partner.

Many of the findings appear to be unique to ideas of what softening looks like in session. For example, the theme of “Decreased Reactivity” is not directly discussed in the literature reviewed for this study. However, being able to lessen reactivity may allow partners to decrease defensiveness, increase empathy, understanding, and acceptance leading to a “softening” of one or both partners. Descriptions of decreased reactivity include phrases such as “able to get point across without getting reactive,” “keeps defenses down,” and “more responsive than reactive as emotions evoked.”

The theme of “Experiencing Progress” seems to be unique to the conceptualizations of softening discussed throughout research. Experiencing

progress throughout session may have influenced a partner's ability to soften their defensiveness and lessen reactivity toward their partner. Statements such as "able to consider other's need for validation" and "better at listening to other's needs and adjusting to meet them" indicate a process of change as each partner experiences or notices change in their partner or themselves.

Application of Findings to Theory

In Chapter 1, General Systems Theory (GST), the INSIGHT Model, and the concept of second-order change were discussed in an effort to provide a foundation for understanding and describing the concept of softening. Linking the findings of this case study back to theory provides greater insight into the softening phenomenon. The GST concepts of wholeness, feedback loops, circular causality, and punctuation provide a framework for understanding the interactional component of softening. The results suggest that softening may not only be understood on an individual level, but on a couple level as well.

Proposed indicators of softening seemed to be linked in interactional sequences observed in therapy. For example, one partner's expression of vulnerability in front of the other may have softened the stance of the observing partner.

However, as the partner who is engaging in vulnerable discussion, behavior, or interaction discovers that their partner is accepting rather than defensive, he or she is able to soften his or her stance as well.

The idea that softening occurs on a couple level, often in interactional sequences is linked to the idea of circular causality and positive feedback loops. Each partner's softening behaviors are linked to the other's behaviors and

responses. The alteration of responses is incorporated into the couple system as new information, creating a positive feedback loop. The interaction itself creates a potential softening of the entire couple system. This process fits with the GST concept of wholeness, as the couple system interacts in a way that creates a unified whole, such as a cohesive softening. There appears to be unique aspect to change in couples therapy that is facilitated by partners taking steps together to decrease defensiveness in united way. The softening phenomenon can also be described as an individual experience if punctuated as such. However, when linking individual behaviors in the context of couple interaction, the process seems to be more interactional in nature.

The integrative concepts of context, perspective, and process from the INSIGHT model provide a framework for the clinical application of the descriptions of softening proposed in this study. For example, relating context to softening may provide greater understanding of the softening phenomenon. Softening indicators were selected from session summaries of selected cases. However, as previously discussed, descriptive labels used by therapists may have been better understood in the context of the entire session. Also, addressing the link of couple's context to softening would provide greater insight into how therapists can design interventions to facilitate softening in couples therapy. For instance, each partner's ethnicity may influence the way decreased defensiveness is expressed or perceived by a partner. The concept of perspective is connected to softening as many indicators of softening were categorized as being shifts in individual point of view. That is, a transition from a

defensive stance to a more vulnerable, accepting position. The process component of softening has also been addressed as indicators and descriptions were viewed in contexts of interactional patterns.

Softening appears to be a subtype of the construct of second-order change. If softening is potentially a key component of the change process of altering negative interactional cycles for stuck couples, softening can be categorized as a second-order change. Indicators of softening proposed to components of the change process in the couples cases selected provide insight into what constitutes second-order change. The cases selected for this couple were identified by the therapists as successful as each couple met therapy goals. The assumption is that change occurred. A next step for softening research would be to explore the levels of softening as they relate to second-order change.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to provide possible indicators of softening to allow for greater understanding of the concept of softening. The hope is that researchers will replicate this study or offer new methods for studying softening. Through the continuation of exploratory studies, a consensus for operationalization of softening can be achieved. A next step would be for researchers to then test for the occurrence of softening in successful and non-successful couples therapy cases. For future research that seeks to explore the concept of softening, several suggestions have evolved through the process of this study.

First, the use of video recorded sessions and multiple observers would allow for greater objectivity in the results. This would allow for increased reliability among the results as the researchers would not solely rely on therapist's reports from sessions. Therapist reports as well as researcher's reports from observations made after viewing video recorded sessions would provide multiple perspectives. Also, improved recording forms to better access process behaviors would provide opportunities to address the interactional component of softening.

Second, using indicators of softening to create observation forms or self-report scales may be another area for focus in the study of softening. This would allow for multiple perspectives from observers and clients involved in therapy. Interviewing clients to gain their perspective on the change process would be another method for gathering multiple views of softening.

Third, therapists could increase their ability to describe change (such as softening) by improving the tracking of client non-verbal behaviors. A limited amount of non-verbal descriptions were analyzed in this study. Examining the non-verbal aspect of softening would provide greater insight into all possible indicators of softening.

Fourth, results suggest indicators of "softening" often accompanied non-emotional encounters that reflected insight or cognitive types of intervention. Most of the definitions of softening found in the literature focus on the emotional component of softening. However, future studies focusing on the possibility of insight or cognitive types of change as related to softening would be helpful.

Employing varying types of research designs would be next steps for continuing the study of softening. For example, comparative analysis of successful couples therapy versus non-successful couples therapy would be a possible area of focus. Also, hypothesis testing would provide greater insight into the components of softening. Suggested hypotheses included:

H1: As one partner exhibits a noticeable amount of softening behaviors in therapy, they will decrease reactivity and defensiveness in their behavior toward their partner.

H2: As one partner decreases their defensiveness, the couple will develop a more satisfying interactional cycle.

H3: As one partner decreases his/her defensive behaviors, the couple will report a higher level of relationship satisfaction.

Conclusion

The information from this study provides a contribution to the ideas found in the literature on softening. Softening is one component of the change process that occurs in couples therapy. Softening can be thought of as second-order change and represents a shift in perspective. As researchers and clinicians gain insight into possible indicators of softening, greater insight of the change process in couples therapy can be achieved. Finally, this research offers numerous conceptual themes and behavioral indicators for consideration in the further development of measures, scales or objective inventories of softening for research and clinical understanding.

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APPENDIX A
Termination Report

Family ID#: _____

CENTER FOR FAMILY SERVICES
103 Human Environmental Sciences West
Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078
(405)744-5058

Termination Report

Date of Intake: _____

Date of First Session: _____

Number of Sessions: _____

Date of Last Session: _____

Official Termination Date: _____

Therapist(s): _____

Type(s) of Therapy and Number of Sessions:

_____ Individual Therapy

_____ Couple/Marital Therapy

_____ Family Therapy

_____ Group Therapy

Reasons for Termination:

_____ Completion of Therapy

_____ Client Request

_____ No Shows/Cancellations (letter sent by therapist)

_____ Other, Please explain:

Were the clients referred to another agency/professional?

_____ Yes - Where? _____

_____ No

Therapist

Therapist

Supervisor

Date

Give a brief description of the presenting problem at the beginning of therapy and a description of the problem upon closure of therapy on the back of this report.

APPENDIX B
Session Summary

Case #
Therapist(s):

Session Summary

Date:
Session # ____

Pre-Session:

Therapy Goals:

TG1.
TG2.

Session Goals:

SG1.
SG2.
SG3.

OSU Model

Context:

Perspective

Process

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Hypotheses:

H1.
H2.
H3.

Interactional Cycle:

Issues of Concern:

Minimal

Significant

C1.	1	2	3	4	5
C2.	1	2	3	4	5

Homework from Prior Session:

H1.
H2.

Post-session:

LvOb ____ TAPE ____ TEAM ____

Clients Present:

Homework: Completed Not Completed

Break Question/Activity:

Summary of Session Content:

Case #

Session Summary

Date:

[Empty box for Case #, Session Summary, and Date]

Supervisor Phone Messages:

[Empty box for Supervisor Phone Messages]

Interventions Used:

[Empty box for Interventions Used]

Progress Toward Session Goals	Minimal			Significant		Met(Y/N)
SG1.	1	2	3	4	5	
SG2.	1	2	3	4	5	
SG3.	1	2	3	4	5	

Homework Given:

[Empty box for Homework Given]

Progress Toward Therapy Goals:	Minimal			Significant		Met(Y/N)
TG1.	1	2	3	4	5	
TG2.	1	2	3	4	5	

New Information from Session:

Context	Perspective	Process
[Empty]	[Empty]	[Empty]

Changes to Hypotheses:

H1.
H2.
H3.

Next Appointment: Date: Time:

Therapist:

Therapist: Supervisor/Date:

APPENDIX C
Background Form

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

ID # _____

FAMILY MEMBER _____

TODAY'S DATE _____

Center For Family Services
 104 Human Environmental Sciences West
 Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078

BACKGROUND FORM

(This information is part of your *confidential* file and will be available to CFS staff for reference/research purposes)

NAME _____ AGE (YEARS) _____ GENDER MALE FEMALE
 (Circle One)

ADDRESS _____ ETHNICITY _____

HOME TELEPHONE _____ WORK TELEPHONE _____

SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER _____ RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE _____

PRIMARY OCCUPATION _____ HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPLETED _____

ARE YOU MARRIED: YES NO IF YES, HOW LONG _____ TIMES MARRIED BEFORE? 0 1 2 3 4
 (Circle One) (Circle One)

ARE YOU A MILITARY VETERAN? YES NO YEARS OF SERVICE _____ TO _____
 (Circle One)

FOR IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBERS (SPOUSE, CHILDREN, AND STEP-CHILDREN). PLEASE LIST NAME, GENDER, AGE, RELATIONSHIP TO YOU, AND CURRENT RESIDENCE (SAME AS YOU OR DIFFERENT).

<u>NAME</u>	<u>GENDER</u>	<u>AGE</u>	<u>RELATIONSHIP TO YOU</u>	<u>RESIDENCE</u> (CITY/STATE IF DIFFERENT) (Circle One)
_____	M F	_____	_____	SAME DIFFERENT _____
_____	M F	_____	_____	SAME DIFFERENT _____
_____	M F	_____	_____	SAME DIFFERENT _____
_____	M F	_____	_____	SAME DIFFERENT _____
_____	M F	_____	_____	SAME DIFFERENT _____
_____	M F	_____	_____	SAME DIFFERENT _____
_____	M F	_____	_____	SAME DIFFERENT _____
_____	M F	_____	_____	SAME DIFFERENT _____
_____	M F	_____	_____	SAME DIFFERENT _____

Notes:

Office Use

- 01= Husband/Father 02= Wife/Mother 03= Son1 04= Daughter1 05= Step Father 06= Step Mother
 08= Fiance-Female 09= Fiance-Male 13= Son2 23= Son3 33= Son4 14= Daughter2 24= Daughter3 34= Daughter4
 98= Individual Female 99= Individual Male 71= Step-Son1 72= Step-Son2 73= Step-Son3 74= Step-Daugh1 75= Step-Daugh2

FOR RELATIVES FROM THE FAMILY IN WHICH YOU GREW UP, PLEASE LIST NAME, GENDER, AGE, RELATIONSHIP, CURRENT RESIDENCE, AND MARITAL STATUS OF ALL WHO ARE STILL LIVING (PARENTS, BROTHERS, SISTERS, STEPPARENTS, BROTHERS, AND STEP-SISTERS).

NAME GENDER AGE RELATIONSHIP TO YOU RESIDENCE (CITY/STATE) MARITAL STATUS

IF ANY MEMBER(S) OF YOUR FAMILY (SPOUSE, CHILDREN, PARENTS, BROTHERS, SISTERS, IS/ARE DECEASED, PLEASE LIST BELOW:

NAME RELATIONSHIP AGE AT DEATH DATE AT DEATH CAUSE OF DEATH

FAMILY PHYSICIAN: NAME _____
 ADDRESS _____

CIRCLE YOUR PRESENT STATE OF HEALTH:

EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR

PLEASE CHECK IF YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED THE FOLLOWING DURING THE PAST SIX MONTHS:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> SEVERE HEADACHES | <input type="checkbox"/> FREQUENT TIREDNESS |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SEVERE BACKACHES | <input type="checkbox"/> FREQUENT TROUBLE SLEEPING |
| <input type="checkbox"/> STOMACH PROBLEMS | <input type="checkbox"/> DIZZINESS OR FAINTING |
| <input type="checkbox"/> EATING PROBLEMS | <input type="checkbox"/> LARGE WEIGHT LOSS OR GAIN |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SEIZURES | <input type="checkbox"/> ASTHMA OR OTHER RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS |
| <input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPLAINED WORRY
OR FEARFULNESS | <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER PROBLEMS (PLEASE SPECIFY)
_____ |

HAS ANY MEMBER OF YOUR IMMEDIATE FAMILY EXPERIENCED ANY OF THE BEFORE MENTIONED SYMPTOMS IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS? _____ IF YES, PLEASE EXPLAIN.

HAVE YOU EVER HAD A SERIOUS MEDICAL ILLNESS? _____ IF YES, PLEASE EXPLAIN.

HAVE ANY OF YOUR CHILDREN OR SPOUSE EVER HAD A SERIOUS MEDICAL ILLNESS? _____
IF YES, PLEASE EXPLAIN.

LIST ALL MEDICATIONS AND/OR DRUGS TAKEN WITHIN THE LAST 6 MONTHS, BOTH
PRESCRIPTION AND NON PRESCRIPTION:

<u>NAME OF MEDICATION/DRUG</u>	<u>REASON TAKEN</u>	<u>CHECK IF TAKING NOW</u>
--------------------------------	---------------------	----------------------------

DO YOU SMOKE? _____ IF YES, HOW MUCH?

DO YOU THINK YOU SMOKE TOO MUCH?

DO YOU DRINK? _____ IF YES, HOW MUCH?

DO YOU THINK YOU DRINK TOO MUCH?

DO YOU THINK ANOTHER FAMILY MEMBER SMOKES OR DRINKS TOO MUCH? _____ IF YES,
PLEASE EXPLAIN.

HAVE YOU EVER ATTEMPTED SUICIDE? _____ IF YES, GIVE DATE(S) AND DETAILS.

HAS ANYONE IN YOUR FAMILY EVER ATTEMPTED SUICIDE? _____ IF YES, GIVE NAME(S),
RELATIONSHIP TO YOU, AND DETAILS.

ARE YOU CURRENTLY RECEIVING SERVICES FROM ANOTHER THERAPIST/COUNSELOR? _____
IF YES, WHO AND FOR WHAT?

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TREATED BY ANOTHER THERAPIST/COUNSELOR? __ IF YES, WHEN, WHERE, AND FOR WHAT?

FROM THE FOLLOWING LIST, PLEASE CHECK THE REASONS THAT YOU ARE SEEKING SERVICE AT THIS TIME.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> PERSONAL ENRICHMENT | <input type="checkbox"/> SINGLE PARENTING |
| <input type="checkbox"/> RELATIONSHIP ENRICHMENT | <input type="checkbox"/> PARENTING-TWO PARENT FAMILY |
| <input type="checkbox"/> MARITAL ENRICHMENT | <input type="checkbox"/> STEP-PARENTING |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FAMILY ENRICHMENT | <input type="checkbox"/> CHILD BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS |
| <input type="checkbox"/> MARITAL CONFLICT | <input type="checkbox"/> ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEM |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FAMILY CONFLICT | <input type="checkbox"/> ALCOHOL ABUSE-CHILD/ADOLESCENT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SEXUAL PROBLEMS | <input type="checkbox"/> DRUG ABUSE-CHILD/ADOLESCENT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> PHYSICAL ABUSE | <input type="checkbox"/> ALCOHOL ABUSE-ADULT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SEXUAL ABUSE | <input type="checkbox"/> DRUG ABUSE-ADULT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT | <input type="checkbox"/> FAMILY STRESS |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ADJUSTMENT TO LOSS | <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (Specify) _____ |

PLEASE DESCRIBE IN YOUR OWN WORDS THE MAJOR REASON FOR SEEKING OUR SERVICES AT THIS TIME.

HOW SERIOUS WOULD YOU SAY THIS PROBLEM IS RIGHT NOW? (CIRCLE ONE)

NOT AT ALL
SERIOUS

SLIGHTLY
SERIOUS

MODERATELY
SERIOUS

VERY
SERIOUS

HOW LIKELY DO YOU THINK THE PROBLEM IS TO CHANGE? (CIRCLE ONE)

NOT AT ALL
LIKELY

SLIGHTLY
LIKELY

MODERATELY
LIKELY

VERY
LIKELY

WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO GAIN FROM OUR SERVICES?

WHO REFERRED YOU TO OUR SERVICES? IF SELF-REFERRED, HOW DID YOU FIND OUT ABOUT OUR SERVICES?

APPENDIX D

Coding Chart

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Codes: T – Therapist C – Client M – Male F - Female O – Observation R – Report

Session #	Defensive Descriptions			Softening Descriptions		
	Male	Female	Couple	Male	Female	Couple



Deena S. Moore

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: SOFTENING: A CRUCIAL TURNING POINT IN COUPLES THERAPY

Major Field: Human Development and Family Science
Specialization: Marriage and Family Therapy

Biographical:

Born in Lubbock, Texas on September 22, 1978, the daughter of Patrick Fernandez and Sheree and Chester Moore.

Education:

Graduated from Putnam City West High School, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in May 1997; received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology, minor in Christian Education from MidAmerica Nazarene University, Olathe, Kansas in May 2001; Completed requirements for the Masters of Science Degree in Human Development and Family Science from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May 2004.

Experience:

Marriage and Family Therapy Intern at Sunbeam Family Services, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma from February 2003 to February 2004; Marriage and Family Therapy Intern at Center for Family Services from June 2002 to February 2004; Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Human Development and Family Science, OU/OSU Early Childhood Collaborative for Oklahoma (ECCO) research project, Oklahoma State University from September 2003 to February 2004; Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Human Development and Family Science, Marriage and Family Therapy research project, Oklahoma State University from September 2001 to August 2003; Teaching Assistant, Department of Family Relations and Child Development, Oklahoma State University, "Pre-professional Lab Experience," from January 2002 to May 2002.

Professional Affiliations:

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), 2002-2004; Poster Presenter, AAMFT 61st Annual Conference, Long Beach, California, Poster Session, "Softening: A Crucial Turning Point in Couples Therapy", October 2003.
Oklahoma Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (OAMFT), 2002-2004; Outstanding Student Award, 2003.