

Different but same
— **How group therapy works in**
EFT couples sessions

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Emotionally focused therapy has been studied earlier as a typical couple therapy, but never before in couples group format. In the one study EFT has been studied in a group format focused on parenting issues, not on intercouple relationships. Group-based emotion-focused couple therapy is a therapy form developed by a Finnish family and couple psychotherapist Marjo Panttila and tried out for the first time in 2017. The aim of our study was to find out how participants in emotionally focused couples group therapy communicate spontaneously on each other's stories.

The study focused on four couples (eight participants) during ten emotionally focused couples group therapy sessions held in Finland in early 2020's. As the thesis question revolved around "how", a qualitative research method was chosen. As the data for this thesis formed from recorded therapy sessions filmed from one angle, nonverbal communication was not consistently visible. Hence this thesis focused almost exclusively on the transcribed verbal "what was said" material and the exact method nears conversational analysis.

We found six themes under which the spontaneous comments could be categorised: Difficulty of expressing emotions, Shame, Differences in love language, Anxious-avoidant cycle of interaction, Emotional security, and Ensuring that the group is safe.

Same topics emerged as in traditional EFT couple therapy. In addition, peer support played a significant role according to our study. The motivation for the participants to share their own experiences was twofold: they wished to gain self-understanding of their own relationship situation, but also were happy to help others. In the future, it would be important to repeat the group EFT therapy sessions in order to ensure the reproducibility of similar results. As a proposal for further research, it could be useful to investigate in more detail also the occurrence of possible negative interruptions in the sessions, as well as the factors that contributed to the emergence of important insights during therapy.

Keywords: EFT, group therapy, couple therapy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg and Schindler (1999) describe emotionally focused therapy (EFT) in the following way; EFT is a systemic form of brief intervention that facilitates the formation of a secure emotional connection between couples in discontent and unhappy relationships. They continue that EFT has been proven to decrease marital distress and in many cases lead to continuing positive improvement even after therapy, due to couples learning to express feelings and needs and facilitate accessibility and responsiveness. According to them, EFT is used to alter harmful cyclical interaction patterns and emotional responses that prohibit a healthy relationship. As an example of harmful interactional cycles Makinen and Johnson (2006) mention critical pursuit and distance combined with defensiveness. According to meta-analysis by Spengler, Lee, Wiebe and Wittenbornet (2022), 70 percent of the couples who undergo EFT sessions are symptom free when the sessions end.

EFT is based on attachment theory (Wiebe & Johnson, 2016) and views that relationship challenges often arise in couples with insecure attachment styles that experience disconnection. Anxious-avoidant cycle of interaction embodies the negative interplay of two insecure attachments, avoidance and anxiety, in a romantic relationship (Li & Chan, 2012). Stevens (2014) explains that avoidantly attached individuals are less reactive to their emotions than anxiously attached, who in turn are overly tuned to their own emotions and therefore often fail to control their emotional impulses.

Emotionally focused therapy has been successfully used for couples, families and individuals in order to gain a better sense of connection between loved ones (Greenman & Johnson, 2022). However, EFT has not often been used in a group setting. The study done by Chun-Sing Cheung, Suk-Man Leung, Lam and Wing-Tung Chan (2022) on emotionally focused therapy group intervention dealt with parenting stress and resulted in decreased parenting stress and more emotionally present parents. However, the study did not address the functioning of the relationship itself, and we did not find any group-based EFT research focusing on the relationships.

The universality of problems can act in a group as a factor that alleviates shame, for example, when the participants in the group notice that they are not the only ones with problems, and feedback from peers can be perceived as much more genuine than support received from a therapist (Malat & Leszcz, 2015). The therapist is paid for support, but spontaneous peer support always only comes

when it is truly meant. Another benefit of peer support in a therapy group is the experience of being valued and accepted by group members (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

The purpose of the study is to provide information about peer commenting that takes place during group-based couple EFT, as there is no previously researched information on the subject. The aim of the study was to find out how participants in emotionally focused couples group therapy communicate spontaneously on each other's stories. During the EFT process, a variety of emotions typically emerge due to emotional needs not being met in a relationship; trying to avoid emotional discomfort is quite common and it's often the reason painful emotions are blocked and ignored (Enez, 2021). These difficult feelings include primary emotions such as sadness and loneliness as well as secondary emotions such as anger which often masks the feeling of being emotionally hurt, or feeling guilt (Vrana & Greenberg, 2018). EFT couple therapy has not been previously studied in a group format, but for our study, peer commentary in an EFT group was analysed. The data included video recordings of ten therapy sessions participated by four couples. Our research question is *How participants in emotionally focused couples group therapy communicate spontaneously on each other's stories.*

2. METHODOLOGY

This study can be considered to fall under both the field of Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) research as well as group therapy research. Both EFT and group therapy as such have been studied before, but we know considerably less of the EFT framework used in group therapy settings. Because of the descriptive nature of our research question, we opted for the use of a qualitative research method as qualitative research aims to understand and showcase the experiences its subjects have in specific contexts (Elliott Fischer & Rennie, 1999).

Using a qualitative research method enabled us to focus on finding and describing social interactions between the participants. Categorising the spontaneous comments the participants made resulted in finding various themes of the comment types. Based on the founded themes we were able to conceptualise the phenomena rising from couples group therapy.

2.1 Design of the research

In this study the focus lies on examining how participants in couples group therapy comment spontaneously to each other's stories in an Emotion focused therapy setting. When a research project is not interested in proving the existence of a cause-effect relationship of any kind, using a qualitative research method is an appropriate choice (Coolican, 2019; Harper, 2012). Since we were specifically interested in investigating the question "how", our study is based on qualitative methods. In the case of this study, a qualitative research method meant observing and analysing video tapes recorded from ten sessions of couples group therapy. The therapy sessions were part of the research project on Group-based Emotion Focused Couples Therapy.

As for a specific analysis method, we opted for doing a modified version of conversation analysis. Modified in a sense that we decided to focus on only verbal communication. Conversation analysis is a way to monitor and analyse interactions that occur naturally (Hutchby, 2019). As we were interested in monitoring what and how the therapy client commented during the sessions, conversation analysis was an appropriate choice. With the help of conversation analysis, we wanted to get information about the interaction between the clients in the group, especially on a micro-level. By focusing on the deeper meaning of the spoken sentences, it is possible to bring out more subtle nuances than just looking at the strings of words alone. In this study, it was especially important to

extract the emotional content of the said matter; which described behaviour or action causes which feelings and how feelings and needs are communicated. Spoken words are not just sentences, but interactions between people.

Conversation analysis is a highly systematic method of studying audio or video recorded verbal and non-verbal communication that occurs naturally (Tietbohl & White, 2022). In our study, the material consisted of video recordings of therapy sessions, where the conversation would have taken place anyway, even without this study. We did not use interviews or surveys to collect data, so the raw material has not been shaped or the discussions led in any direction by the researchers.

In the end, because the quality of our video footage was poor in some places, and we could not see the faces of all the participants or enough non-verbal communication, we decided to use a modified method of conversation analysis where we focus almost exclusively on the transcribed "what was said" material. This meant we left out other non-verbal communication, except for the sake of clarity, occasional notes to the transcriptions, such as a chuckle or hand gestures to indicate whose speech the narrator was spontaneously commenting on.

2.2 The participants and gathering the data

The data for this study originated from ten sessions of couples group therapy. The voluntary participants were four marital couples, in which each were male and female. Three of the couples were approximately in their mid-forties and one in their late sixties. Everyone's names are pseudonymised in this study so that couple 1 is referred to as Man 1 and Woman 1, couple 2 referred to as Man 2 and Woman 2, and so on. In each of the therapy sessions there were two experienced psychotherapists present facilitating and monitoring the sessions. The group sessions were held approximately twice a month during the early 2020s. Each of the group sessions were videotaped resulting in ten recordings. Also a follow-up session was held one year after the end of the group, but this session is not included in our research data.

The participants were chosen by two psychotherapists responsible for the therapy sessions. The chosen couples had to fill three criteria: both of the spouses had to be willing to participate in the study, neither one suffered from a serious mental illness, and there was no physical violence or any threat of it in the relationship. These criteria were created on the notion that EFT is not suitable for

couples separating or relationships suffering from abuse (Johnson et al, 1999). To ensure a good fit, volunteer couples who answered a newspaper announcement were also interviewed.

All the participants were informed on the research and signed informed consent. This meant that videotaping the sessions was agreed upon and everyone felt relatively comfortable with it. The participants also knew that the collected data would be used for research purposes.

2.3 Analysing the data

Both Tietbohl and White (2022) and Rapley (2012) state that conversation analysis is always based on data that is objectively possible to hear or see and accessible to other researchers later on if needed. Rapley continues that there are no strict, set in stone procedures in conversation analysis, though the analysis must always be done in an orderly and consistent way.

For us, analysing the data first meant getting ourselves familiar with the video material. As we had not been present during the actual therapy sessions, we did not know what sort of material recordings consisted of. Fortunately, all of the recordings had picked up audio data at a sufficient level, except for some short clips with unclear sound quality, and there was no need to exclude any of the ten sessions from the analysing phase. Since the participants sat in a circle during the therapy sessions and only one camera was at use, not all of the faces were visible. Partly because of this we decided to focus our research only on what the participants were actually saying. Though gestures and other unspoken communication would surely have enriched our study, there was just not enough consistent and reliable data on what to form coherent analyses.

As Rapley (2012) describes, the data used in conversation analysis must be unstructured and mostly free-flowing conversation. After familiarising ourselves with the data, we then proceeded to focus on spontaneous commenting made by a participant addressing the situation of another couple. In other words, the next significant exclusion we did was to leave out talk or comments made by the participants that were not said spontaneously and did not address in any way other participants from another couple than the commenter themselves. All the comments that fell into the category "spontaneous" and "addresses something the other participant from another couple has said" were then transcribed in detail.

We gathered and transcribed 42 fragments of data in the beginning. Once we had our transcribed research data in hand we started categorising the comments based on the nature of the

comment. We then decided to exclude some of the fragments due to their lack of information content. Some of the comments contained only affirmative words, such as agreeing or announcing that the couple plans to come to the next session as well. There were eventually 33 fragments that were relevant and informatively rich enough to the research. From these, again the most informative and knowledge-producing material was selected and included in our final analysis.

2.4 Ethics of this research

Because of the delicate nature of this research, the participants' whole identity was only known by the therapists that facilitated the group therapy sessions. In the sessions the participants acted on a first name basis. In this study, however, all the participants are only addressed by their gender and by which couple they belong to. The numbering is based on in which order the couples introduced themselves in the first session.

To ensure total transparency the participants were told that the sessions would be recorded and used for research purposes. Using the collected data in a study was specified. The participants were also informed that their personal information would not be shared to anyone besides the two therapists.

As for making sure that the participants had not been affected negatively by the 10 sessions they attended, after each session all the participants were asked to give personal feedback on a SRS 3.0 form. Session Rating Scale maps out the therapy client's experience of whether the client was heard, understood, respected, whether essential and important things were talked about, whether the counsellor's and the group's working methods were appropriate, and whether the client felt like belonging to the group (Duncan et al. 2003). Also, a debriefing was held one year after the main sessions. Three of the four couples were present at the debriefing session. As Thompson and Chambers (2012) state, avoiding harm to the participants in a qualitative study should be one of the driving ethical guidelines for the researchers. According to them, it is therefore crucial to understand that a participant should not be left alone with for example possible upset that might have occurred during the research.

The study does not have any financial or other ties that could affect the objectivity of the results.

3. FINDINGS

We studied how participants in couples group therapy communicate spontaneously on each other's stories. The comments were themed into six different categories according to their content. The categories that took shape from the pool of spontaneous comments were Difficulty of expressing emotions, Shame, Differences in love language, Anxious-avoidant cycle of interaction, Emotional security and Ensuring that the group is safe.

3.1 Difficulty of expressing emotions

The difficulty of expressing emotions was the most common topic during the therapy sessions. The extracts reflect the difficulty of recognising and voicing one's emotions but also highlight the importance of verbalising one's feelings and needs. The participants also talked about whether they still could learn to express their emotions and the need to break for the sake of their children.

The difficulty of talking about feelings was understood to arise from the poor emotional climate of childhood. Productive and unproductive alternative ways to express emotions instead of talking were discussed. Also, the couples first seemed to think that other couples do not have problems nor have the need to talk about feelings. This theme was discussed already during the first therapy session.

Difficulty of engaging in a discussion about feelings

Difficulty of expressing emotions verbally and directly to one's spouse was a profound issue to some of the participants. Particularly the male participants talked about challenges of engaging in a discussion about feelings requiring significant effort and being uncomfortable with being vulnerable.

Below, Man 1 identifies similarities between him and Man 4 in regard to finding it difficult to talk about emotions and be vulnerable in front of his spouse. There seems to be a fear that expressing feelings could be punished or that showing vulnerability could be used against oneself.

Woman 4: It just feels really bad to think that Man 4 would fear that it would be used as a weapon against him. As if that's the reason you can't open up, that I would use your soft side or if you'd show some sensitivity, that I'd use it against you. That is quite a vote of no confidence.

Man 1: (...) I find it really easy to identify with that. Like my friend who really talks a lot, can express things by talking but no, I'm quite the emotional lock guy.

The men of the group also felt that other couples they know do not have to discuss about emotions with one another in order to maintain their relationship. The belief that problems are present only in one's own relationship while everyone else's are perfect caused frustration. Below, Man 2 expresses irritation and finds it challenging to share his emotions openly in a relationship. The men compare their own relationships to other people's relationships and Man 2 confessed being envious towards other couples who never seem to have charged discussions but still appear to be happy.

Man 2: When I have that difficult feeling of being annoyed, let alone that I could go ahead and say it aloud. That probably would already be a great thing to be able to do. That I expressed the feeling even a bit that I feel uncomfortable. (...) And on the other hand, we have people around us having relationships, where nothing is said aloud. (...) Everything is so great and fabulous and wonderful, but apparently nothing is being talked about and the relationship has lasted for a long time and they're always satisfied.

Man 1: It's just what I experience too, that I go to visit a friend and they're smiling and happy and they're surely fine and they don't have anything, you see, those what we have. But that's not what you see when you go to visit.

Expressing feelings via action

Because of the difficulty of verbalising one's feelings, participants had adopted other forms of expression. Both productive and counterproductive ways of dealing with often difficult feelings and situations were mentioned. With the use of silent treatment the participant seeks a reaction of any kind from the spouse to their own unbearable emotional state. By not speaking, on the other hand, it was ensured that there would be no negative consequences from expressing one's feelings and needs.

Below, Man 1 seeks connection by giving his spouse the silent treatment even though he knows how unfair this behaviour is. By now, it has become a habit and used as a way to indicate that his feelings are hurt, and he feels abandoned by his significant other. Man 1 understands how counterproductive it is to use silent treatment, but he doesn't want to hurt his spouse's feelings with unkind words. Woman 4 offers peer support with words of encouragement and validates how important it is to be able to self-reflect.

Man 1: It's like hurting and like controlling, like martyrdom, you're like, hey, I'm here, I'm going to arrange these clothes when you're going to visit a friend to spend the evening with, (...) I want to show that I am being treated wrongly.

Woman 4: And I think it's a good thing that you recognised that, it's the evil one who screams and shouts, but when you used the word mental violence (...) I thought that it's not any better that you're doing silent treatment and you've such power at that.

Man 1: And I justify it to myself by saying that it's okay that this thing annoys me, but I don't want to say it out loud, because then the other person will feel bad. It's as if I justify it to myself that I don't want to hurt other people's feelings, but in practice I still do things that seem to cause that bad feeling.

Two of the male participants have tried to seek alternative ways to express emotions. Both face challenges with verbalising their emotions in front of their spouses and in doing so also repressing their own needs. Man 1 and Man 2 have tried to fix the situation by expressing their emotions by writing instead. Perhaps writing gives more time to identify and analyse. It could be viewed as a more distant, and thus safer, way of communicating and getting touch with your own emotions.

Man 1: I'll sometimes write it down in a message when I can't say it out loud.

Man 2: Well I just talked about the other Saturday or so when we had that sort of let's talk about things on Saturdays. So if nothing else, then I have used writing to list and tell what's on my mind and get it out that way.

Wanting to learn

Even though the men of the group share how they find emotion expression to be highly challenging for them, there is a desire to learn and develop skills on the matter. Talking about feelings is seen as a way to improve and develop a relationship. Man 3 explains how his relationship has become better after learning new skills on talking about emotions. Man 2 picks up on that and states that he'd like to learn how to better express emotions. While on the subject, the participants also ponder whether it

is possible for middle aged people to learn new skills on this matter. Peer support and encouragement helps Man 2 to believe that it is possible for him to learn to talk about his feelings.

Man 2: I would like to learn to speak better and more clearly about things that I kind of stress unnecessarily about, things that shouldn't be stressed about. That would be my personal goal, which would make our relationship easier if I was more open in it. But here I am at (*mentions his exact age*), and I still haven't learned. It can be difficult to learn, but with small steps anyway.

Couple 2 and the therapists talk shortly and then Woman 4 continues spontaneously.

Woman 4: From here I could say, when you said that you are so old, so that we don't lose our faith completely, that we can still learn.

Man 2: Well okay, good, yeah (*laughs*). But this was such a bad fear for me, that if it's not a thing for you, it is for me in a way.

Difficulty of breaking the cycle

The participants voiced several times how experiences from childhood had affected and moulded their capabilities to deal with and express their emotions. In addition to being frustrated with their own situation, it was also painful not being able to set an example of better emotion expression and regulation to their children.

Below, Man 3 and Man 4 analyse that the way emotions were or were not dealt with in their childhood has followed them to adulthood. There is also sadness due to the fact that they have not been able to break the cycle but have perhaps modelled this same behaviour to their children.

Man 3: We don't have that kind of tradition from childhood, so it's quite difficult to start bringing these things up with your best friends necessarily, it doesn't feel natural, but especially when we're caught up in those cycles where you've kind of gotten to know each other because of these issues, that we want to discuss, that's it, yes, then the talking will happen.

Man 4: Yeah, it's pretty cool that our sons have (...) that kind of emotional world. When they were smaller and the oldest son was very angry at one point, or because I didn't know how to take those feelings well (...) Doing things together is so much more familiar, you could have had more of it and brought that world of emotions into the connection together with activity. But in hindsight, there is too little time, to be together with the children, to do things together that would have made it easier.

Man 3: And I feel a lot of that, at least, that I should have been able to verbalise, for example, those feelings much better from there, like from a young age.

Man 4: Exactly.

Couple 4 tells how they have received feedback from their adult children that none of them really know how to talk about emotions in their family. Couple 4 resents their own perceived failure as parents because of the feedback their children have given them about not speaking about emotions at home. Woman 2 and Man 1 offer a fresh perspective on the matter and discuss how safe the atmosphere must be at a home where adult children feel comfortable to start a discussion around such a vulnerable topic.

Woman 2: I think it's really brave, like of your girls, or I think and immediately compare it to ours, when I think about four children and so on, really brave and then that you must be quite open, however, your relationships with the children, so that there is some openness there that you dare to bring this matter up.

Woman 4: Hmmm.

Woman 2: So that is, it's a really open conversation!

Man 1: I was just thinking the same thing, because I come from a family like that, there's not much talk about emotions, and I started thinking that it's extremely difficult to start with your father or mother in your thirties.

Woman 2: To demand something, hey, let's talk about emotions.

3.2 Shame

A frequently recognised and shared emotion among the couples was shame. Shame was expressed both directly as well as indirectly. It was described as a painful, yet not always recognised, emotion that caused guilt and protest behaviour. Participants were not always able to name what they were feeling as shame was sometimes hidden under other emotions and actions and was thus difficult to recognise. Shame was associated with unconstructive behaviour and with not being able to regulate own behaviour in the relationship. The feeling of shame also emerged when talking about needs and wants that one might have had.

It is noteworthy that when participants talked about their own experiences of shame, it made other group members feel relieved that they were not the only ones feeling the way they did. Shared experiences revolving around the feeling of shame were viewed as both important and helpful. The realisation of shame causing negative behaviour seemed to increase understanding towards one's own actions and also comprehension and compassion towards spouse. The participants started talking about shame already during the second session.

Shame of treating one's spouse unfairly

Shame also dealt with feeling bad about one's own perceived poor behaviour towards their partner and not being able to regulate their own behaviour. It was also described as liberating to both be able to talk openly about one's own feelings of shame but also to hear that others had felt those negative feelings too.

Man 1: I feel this sort of horrible pain that I can't really put into words and then I have to make faces and gestures and sigh out loud and try to message that "Help me, help me spit this out" (...) I will do my best so she'll definitely notice that there's something going on with me (...)

Woman 2: At that moment, do you recognise the feeling, the thought, when you're acting this way, are you aware of it?

Man 1: Ye, yes I do acknowledge it and I know that I'm acting so unfairly towards my partner and then the guilt follows and the bad feeling of me acting so childish.

Man 2: I recognise that too, that I just won't come and say it, I'll just leave it unsaid. Sort of push it down.

Woman 3 and Man 1 view and analyse their own negative behaviour in their relationships in the extract below. Particularly Woman 3 finds it shameful but also liberating being able to admit out loud that she herself sometimes fails to act respectfully towards her partner and is somewhat glad to hear Man 1 struggling with the same problem. Man 1 expresses his solution to dispel shame and gain more self-control by making his behaviour visible through speaking out loud.

Woman 3: It was in some way relieving when you said, how do you feel that you yourself are taking advantage of some of the weak points, or however you said it, what do you know in the other person. (...) I've been thinking lately that somehow I don't even have the courage to admit to myself (...) how bad I treat my spouse sometimes. I mean, when you're angry, you do it consciously a little bit, as if I'm trying to make the other person feel bad. And it's a terrible feeling, then you still couldn't admit that I did act like that. (...)

Man 1: No, it's difficult, you're in that feeling, so you're trying to remember that hey, you're behaving in a harmful way, but then I've thought about it so that the only way to try to change it is to say it out loud here. Saying about it and talking about it openly out loud, that hey, at that moment I can say it. And then maybe at some point, in some situation, when we are about to go there to say unpleasant things to the other, so maybe one can stop it.

Shame is quite a sensitive topic and sometimes presents itself only as an afterthought. Below, woman 3 describes being aware of her own bad behaviour in the relationship, but does not name her feelings directly. Instead, she uses the word "sinfulness" to cover the feeling of shame. She feels relieved to notice that others act the same way as well.

Woman 3: I could also comment on what Man 1 talked about last time how he quite frankly even purposely acts badly towards the partner. That was a really big thing for me because I have thought about how awful and horrible I can be. Like that I really do act on purpose even though I know I shouldn't, and all the sinfulness that goes with it. It's really, really hard. And something that I haven't really been able to say out loud. So the fact that now it's been said out loud. And then it got me thinking that maybe I'm not alone in this. That maybe someone else also struggles.

Shame of having needs

Shame is also associated with having needs and voicing those needs out loud in a relationship. Even though participants' partner's needs and wants are seen as acceptable, at the same time the feeling of shame is present as their own neediness is somehow shameful and thus neglected.

Woman 3 has explained earlier during the sessions how it is difficult for her to express her needs and feelings of loneliness. She recognises that the underlying feeling is shame. Man 1 joins the conversation and mentions how he only now really gained understanding about their cycle-like behaviour in the relationship after listening to couples 2 and 3. Man 1 expresses feelings of shame and embarrassment quite openly.

Man 1: Somehow, I have to say it somehow, you talked about it earlier, about the shame (...) It's embarrassing to say it out loud, when it's also embarrassing in a certain way to say that I need you, that I'm having a hard time or that I'm being anxious, I need you. One brings it like, help me.

Shame of letting others know

The feeling of shame was also brought up during the sessions when one participant told about her fear of possibly being judged by others. Woman 3 ensures her that others hardly think much about other than their own issues, so embarrassment and shame of being open about one's own situation is unnecessary. Man 1 continues by sharing his experience about being open and then reassures the others how feelings of doubt or shame are natural.

Woman 3: It is very easy for people to feel like they think that everyone is thinking about me, but I have to admit that I've sat here all these times and I have thought that I am a terrible

person. (...) People usually like to think more about themselves than others. So because of that, and it's some kind of delusion maybe because everyone thinks about what I do or say or what kind of person I am. But I don't have enough energy when I try to think about my own (issues) here.

Man 1: Do you remember, after our session, I was quite sure that the therapist would reserve a place in a shelter for Woman 1. It's so natural to react like that.

3.3 Differences in love language

One theme found was about intercouple differences in “the language of love”. Language of love can be described as the typical way for an individual to express their affection to their spouse. During the conversations it became apparent that some of the participants had a strong notion that the correct and valid way to show love in a relationship was via words. Other than verbally expressing love was not either well noticed or interpreted right. The miscommunication caused uncertainty and frustration between the spouses.

Differences cause uncertainty

Differences in the language of love was something that particularly two of the couples had struggled with prior to therapy as it had been difficult for them to recognise and value each other's ways of showing love. Not connecting on an emotional level had created anxiety between couples and feelings of not being loved. As the talks in therapy sessions progressed and views were exchanged, the discussion broadened to understand that showcasing love is not limited only to verbal expression. It was accepted that acts of love and physical touch are also a valid way to show affection.

Man 1: I was just thinking about what you said just like that, what is love in this relationship and I just started thinking, when you sometimes see couples like that, they show each other feelings and that I cannot act like them, I can't reach it, and you were just the couple who set the perfect example of being able to touch and always come and sit on a lap, and I just don't, they're just the couple who show love and I always get the feeling that I can't do the things you do.

Woman 3: Well, okay, maybe we can (...) It might have been what kept us together. We've been similar in that way, it's the way it has started and at the same time, if Man 3 had been

different or I would have been different, probably things in this relationship would not have fit together.

Recognising and learning different ways of love

The participants realise they have to learn to understand their spouse's ways of showing affection. It seems that, for these couples at least, understanding a different love language than the one they use is critical in noticing that they are being loved.

Woman 3: Could you think that the way that the comforting is shown could be something else than like talking or such? Because I've tried to learn now, and I don't know how well, but like when I want something, like that he would say certain words or do certain things, so I've tried to learn that ok, maybe he doesn't know how to say this or do that, but he does, Man 3 does something else. (...) He didn't know what to say, he would start rubbing my shoulders or things like that. So now I've tried to learn, learn that when he acts like that it means that he wants to help me in this situation.(...) But it means that you have to kind of give up on your own view on what comforting can be, like that now this means it. Like for example that Man 4 has shown up here, though it is not easy and not in his comfort zone, it does mean something. (...)

Man 4: And then when she (signals to Woman 4) hasn't ever noticed for example a ready-peeled pear, it's kind of the same thing as with that massage.

Man 4 had mentioned that his way of showing love to his wife was to peel a pear to her. The therapist discusses the symbolism of peeling a pear and asks Man 4 to tell Woman 4 about it directly. Couple 3 joins the conversation, Man 3 encourages couple 4 by comparing them to a story of an old married couple who showed their care only through everyday actions. The therapist comments that Man 3 is talking about signs of caring and Woman 3 sums up that expressing love should ideally contain both actions and words.

Woman 3: Yes, and when did we talk about those acts of love? So I don't mean sex, but those things that show someone that I do care about them. It's like something concrete, maybe, in a way, I agree with Woman 4 in that, yes, it has to be, there should also be that talking. But then, on the other hand, you should also learn to interpret the other's actions.

Couples experience a deepening of understanding both through self-examination and also when listening to the other couples. The experience of lovelessness can gradually recede when learning how to interpret acts of love correctly, and at the same time remembering how important it also is to learn new ways to show your care.

Couple 4 has discussed earlier whether it would be possible to act differently during conflict situations. Man 3 starts to open up how he himself has tried to change his ways of acting during conflicts between him and his spouse.

Man 3: I've maybe gone and massaged her shoulders or done something, anything to change the way I've acted and maybe that has had an impact on everything as a whole. And I'm sure Woman 3 has also done things differently than before. It's like, it's kind of like the thing you're thinking when listening to (*nods to couple 4*), that it's something you've also tried to do.

3.4 Anxious-avoidant cycle of interaction

Anxious-avoidant cycle of interaction was a common theme during the sessions. The therapists explained on a high-level what EFT says about attachment styles; avoidant and anxious people often drift into negative circular behaviour patterns in their relationships, which then repeat themselves over and over again during disagreements. When in emotional distress, anxious spouses often become hypervigilant in seeking connection while avoidants withdraw and become defensive. Several conversation extracts in our study described the cycle of how one party of the couple retreats and the other anxiously follows trying to solve the situation compulsively. It seems both parties try to regulate difficult-perceived feelings; a withdrawn person needs to regulate their feelings in solitude, while an anxious person seeks connection in order to deal with their feelings together with their spouse.

Cycles are hard to break

All the couples suffered from some form of repeated cycles of harmful interaction such as a cycle of critical complaint which is followed by defensiveness and emotional distance from the spouse. The therapists helped to frame the situation in theoretical terms and in doing so directed the focus of the discussions to the possible harmful interaction cycles the couples might have. These negative communication cycles were brought up in the discussion already in the third therapy session.

Below, Man 2 retreats to another room in the event of a dispute, and Woman 2 seeks to resolve the situation by forcibly trying to connect and follows him wherever he goes. Behind the anxious solving attempt is the fear of being left alone and the loss of connection. This leads to a strong effort to forcefully resolve the situation and reach calmness again. Woman 2 describes her frantic behaviour during a relationship dispute and shares how difficult it is for her in those moments to give her spouse space. Couple 1 has tried to break the harmful cycle by having time-outs, without any chasing since there is usually no need to solve everything right away. Man 3 also suggests trying to restore the connection by touch instead of constantly trying to talk.

Woman 2: I'm going like, open the door, come here now. That is, in my opinion, it is really terrible. And how Woman 1 described that I know those same situations, that the fear probably comes from childhood and that everything has to be, everything has to be figured out (...)

Man 1: I think we've had situations like that where you're there (*talks to his spouse Woman 1*), you're thinking that let it be then.

Woman 1: Yes, and it has developed then, so let it be, I'm not going to take part in that. (...) Let him play his game alone.

Man 3: (...) It's resolved because you meet at some point, then it makes peace and resolves the situation, then, there will be a conversation (...) maybe the screwing (*referring to Woman 2's style to persistently seek for solution*) and running after is not what's easiest, what helps the most, or the fact that you never say anything. (...) There was the instruction that you have to hug for 20 seconds and so on, coming close and the kind of support and acceptance and the interest in getting encouragement in some way.

The participants are also aware that their avoidant or anxious behaviour patterns affect their actions as parents. They are worried about whether their children are able to learn more mature behaviour patterns instead of falling into non-functional ones seen at home. Woman 3 also expresses hope that her children would realise that one doesn't have to settle for a dysfunctional relationship, but that adults can actively strive to build a better functioning and loving partnership and family ties.

Woman 3: In a way it's like that avoidant (*refers to her husband*) and then the clingy (*refers to herself*), like, maybe aggressive or with the, you know, it can be seen in our relationship as well as with the children. That's what I've been thinking about. Or somehow.

Man 4: Yes, this is also where the children see our roles and ways of behaving (...)

Woman 3: I was thinking that (...) it was said that we're passing down these really, really functional and nice models to the children, so, hmm. I hope they are smarter than us. And maybe now I hope they can be seen, see that you can try to do something about these.

It seems that both Woman 3 and Man 1 struggle with the exact same challenges. They both have needs and desires, but expressing them in a relationship calmly and openly is difficult for them. Woman 3 resolves the situation by acting accusatively, while Man 1 is aware of his deliberate actions

of punishing his spouse with silent treatment. However, both have a vulnerable side that wants to be seen and loved.

Woman 3: It can be my way of being clingy, that there's a nice cafe over there and we never go there. So that kind of classic, in a way I hint a little that I actually miss this, and if nothing comes out of it, then maybe it might move to criticism and aggression. But there are a thousand ways to express this matter.

Man 1: (...) It's a power battle and who will win it, so I strongly agree with it, of course, a very strong need to win and somehow have that kind of power or somehow rule with that silence: feel guilty when you didn't go to the park with me. And somehow that's exactly the unhealthy part of the relationship.

Disconnection is scary

It seems that for the anxious, the avoidant's non-reaction and total withdrawal are the most difficult things to handle; even an argument appears to be a better option than complete silence, because arguing at least means that there is a reaction. A complete silence and withdrawal on the other hand possibly echoes the emptiness and disconnect felt in childhoods' attachment relationship.

In the extract below, Woman 3 talks about the difficulty of setting boundaries for herself, so she gives herself permission to behave verbally aggressively. Woman 4 identifies with the same challenge too and explains how her spouse's unresponsiveness is a difficult thing to bear.

Woman 3: But when the other person doesn't defend themselves, it's really hard for me to think that okay, it's probably okay to do this. Somehow, maybe it's like that. And that's it, you should start building it out somehow so that I can't do it this way. Or boundaries, that I can't do this or say that. Maybe so.

Woman 4: I recognise the same, somehow in everyday life it feels like you can't wake up the other person. I just keep continuing, so the other one would react somehow. And then he reacts, but usually not.

Below, Woman 2 describes how she feels during a relationship conflict. Described emotional context includes fear and anxiety that arises from feeling disconnected. She uses the word "emergency" which describes the enormity of the felt anxiety and distress.

Woman 2: And I would like to say on that as Man 1 just described it, that how he behaves, pulls back and in a way uses it to his advantage, because the other way is, what I was talking about "screwing", that, there is such a terrible fear in the background and (*feeling of*)

emergency. That is, when the other person withdraws and goes further away and does not speak. It causes (...) a lot of anxiety. It's just like a panic is on, now I can't get close to him, he pulls away, he's quiet and there are emotions underneath, so it's that I'm in such a terrible state of emergency right now and you don't know what can happen here and there is no connection.

3.5 Emotional security

Emotional security and feeling secure in the relationship is almost an umbrella theme throughout all the extracts. The need to feel emotionally secure in a relationship is present whether the issue is a gap in communication, or the feelings of insecurity arise when dealing with non-constructive ways of behaving.

The extracts selected for this category either contain a directly expressed need for emotional security or clearly indicate the participant's need to feel secure on an emotional level. Emotional security was a spontaneously discussed topic already in the first therapy session.

Where did the connection go?

For the participants, the main reason for feeling a lack of emotional security was a lack of connection between the spouses. The loss of connection had to do with various issues like the feeling of loneliness and the experience of not being heard. The participants did, however, desperately want that connection between their spouses to be restored and feel emotionally content and secure again.

Earlier during one of the sessions, Woman 3 had said that she had already at some point decided that the relationship was over. Woman 2 shares that she now has reached her limit of feeling being left alone. There is a slight undertone of desperation in Woman 2's comment. She brings up seeking emotional safety and how that need has not been met in a relationship. Insecurity seems to arise from the experience of being alone on an emotional level and the much needed connection between spouses is lost.

Woman 2: But what Woman 3 is saying, now I think that we are at the limit in our relationship, that is, I have already thought about it, that I'm giving up. That is, how Woman 3 said that she was looking for that security and comfort and such, and didn't get that. So now I notice the exact same situation, that is, even if I say directly to Man 2 that don't leave me alone in this

situation, that is, I feel so bad that I can't handle it, so it's not sure whether he turns his back or not. So it's like that, I think it's in the state as Woman 3 says, that is, I'm already getting the feeling that I have to find another way to escape, because I don't, it doesn't work anymore, even though I say it very clearly that the emergency is huge and so on, it still doesn't matter anymore.

Below, Woman 1 had voiced how she feels insecure in the relationship nowadays and doesn't know how to restore the missing emotional security and Woman 4 picks up on that. She verbalises how supportive and warm responses to her needs and emotions from her spouse would restore the feeling of emotional security. There doesn't seem to be any need to solve an individual issue, but to be present emotionally for her in a time of need. Lack of connection and outright refusal to communicate on an emotional level is what is stopping getting security and connection back into the relationship.

Woman 4: I think too, when you think that safety is really important, it just occurred to me that I miss it, that if I have a problem, that I could get compassion or empathy from Man 4. (...) But it's just those things that if I've probably yelled out my longing feeling for security, just when there's an emergency, someone else comes and responds to my feelings at that moment, that's security.

Woman 1 and Woman 4 seem to both diminish their own emotions for the sake of their spouse. Trying to facilitate someone else's feelings with the costs of ignoring their own, leaves them dissatisfied and needing connection even more. Woman 4 seeks for an emotional connection by indirect, yet extreme means: either by raising her voice or by silent treatment. This proves to be unsuccessful time and time again as emotional connection is not restored.

Woman 1: At least I easily get to the point where I maybe think about my partner's thoughts more than my own, and what he wants, and let's do it his way. You don't necessarily have to do it the way I want. (...) I guess if I act like that for a long time enough, then you won't necessarily notice it anymore.

Woman 4: Well, I always think that when you are satisfying other people's needs, so I'm waiting for the other person to satisfy my needs too, so that it should come automatically, and then I get angry with myself for not knowing how to set my own limits and then, you can't build to the connection that hey, I need something, and both of you feel that you need something, and then you don't find balance with that thing, and then the cup fills up and we "take the thing out from the closet", that's it, that was a good expression to "shove that difficult thing into the closet" and I always recognise that when I know that this is now the thing about us to, we can't get into that emotional connection, I pull myself away really far and then somehow soon, I've imagined that I am doing silent treatment, but I guess I always am, sometimes I have the feeling that this is the thing, I know there is no solution, so I pull away, or sometimes I scream my lungs empty and it doesn't help either, those are my solutions, and then Man 4 as well distances himself even more.

Are we on the same team?

The other issues with lack of emotional security was that the couples did not feel like there was true reciprocity in the relationship. Emotional distance and insecurity arose from the experience of not being on the same team with your spouse.

Man 3 described how he has challenges admitting to his spouse that he is sometimes wrong. Woman 4 shares then that in her relationship it's Man 4, who cannot seem to admit being wrong. Woman 4 describes in detail her own feelings of frustration, anger, fear and embarrassment as well as being vulnerable. Therapist's encouragement has helped her to understand that the ability to talk about difficult things is a sign of security in a relationship. This has clearly opened a new perspective for her; discussions about difficult issues are also important and talking openly is a more constructive solution than sweeping things under the rug. The extract still shows insecurity and fear that expressing feelings can be reacted to by ignoring or rejecting.

Woman 4: What Man 3 is saying, that it's difficult for him to admit that he's wrong, or as you described it, that you have to succeed in everything. (...) If he makes a mistake, then he pours it on me or on our boys and that's when I'm like that you just can't do that. Those situations make me scream or shout that it can't be like this. (...) It was so nice that the therapist at least said that this is kind of such a safe relationship, that you can be wrong, you can just, you can talk about embarrassing things, that's what I would like for our relationship to have safe, security, that both can be, I can also be the vulnerable one who, well, that I challenge myself, even if I fear that I will be rejected, I challenge myself to talk more about this.

The doubt of your spouse being supportive emotionally, casts a shadow to the intimate side of the relationship. There is a clear need for creating emotional connection before a physical one. With one couple the lack of touching in everyday life has led to the idea that all touching is associated with sex. On the other hand, Woman 4 also describes the difficulty of letting her spouse touch her at all. Though she desperately longs to be touched, the sexual charge associated with all touching, makes her reject any possible attempts for physical closeness.

Woman 3: If everyday life is that we are positioned opposite to each other, and not acting as one team, then maybe it doesn't make sex or any tenderness or anything else easy. If that everyday life is constantly the same, like arguing or fighting.

Woman 4: Yes, that's a good point, and yes, just like you said, that if you feel like you're on a slightly different team, then it's pretty hard to be on the same team in bed either.

Woman 3: So it's going to be like, somehow, I don't know.

Man 4: Well, what you described sounds quite familiar. It requires a bit of the same tuning into the atmosphere and a bit of a shared eye for the game. That there is such a connection.

Woman 4: I have the same experience that when it comes to the same thing, there's no showing of affection, when you don't even dare to let one come close. And to even that close, since we don't have much touching anyway, but just that, if it's always the case that this will lead to sex, that's what it's all about, that's what I'm afraid of. That I don't want it now, that I want before that, the emotional connection.

3.6 Ensuring that the group is safe

Our study also revealed potential risks of emotional discomfort or being offended by another participant's comment and the fear of being judged by the other participants. The possibility for a participant getting upset over others commenting on their situation was recognised by the group members. Fortunately, the group had formed a healthy and respectful group dynamic over the course of several sessions. This was showcased by the way the participants wanted to make sure no one felt dismissed by the others so that they didn't hurt each other with their comments.

Woman 3 wanted to make sure that Couple 4 hadn't gotten upset with her commenting that their situation sounds interesting. The comment wasn't meant to diminish the pain of their difficulties but made with the intention of expressing how Woman 3 recognised familiar elements in Couple 4's story and found it helpful to her.

Woman 3: I just kept thinking about it last time, did I somehow say so stupidly that in a way when it is about your things (...) so in your own matter it is such a difficult situation and then the other person comes up saying that it's interesting, and it's not the point, with your difficulties, but because you're so caught up in your own life and those disputes that you don't see any point in it, in a way, then you see that someone else there is having same kind of situation and there are those roles that maybe in my eyes look similar to mine, so it's easier to understand my own pattern as well.

Conversation below started when Man 2 had mentioned during therapy that he feels like all members of the group have a bad image of him and that sets him on a defensive mode. Previously, couple 2 had brought up Man 2's alcohol use and this had led Man 1 to comment further on the topic. Because of this Man 2 felt that the group's perception of him is negatively stigmatised. Although Man 2 assures that there was no damage done, his comment where he questions how other participants view him negatively, indicates that some level of emotional damage has happened.

Man 1: I have one thing, which was bothering me last time. Right at the end I was talking about my own alcohol use, and I was listening to Woman 2. (...) I don't, I hope, I was just

thinking about the last time, that I hope Man 2 didn't think that I was accusing him of using intoxicants or something.

Man 2: Not that way, I understood your point.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Summary of the findings

We analysed spontaneous comments among four couples (i.e eight participants) during ten therapy sessions held in Finland in early 2020's. The aim of the thesis was to find out how participants in emotionally focused couples group therapy communicate spontaneously on each other's stories. We found six main themes under which the spontaneous comments could be categorised based on their content: Difficulty of expressing emotions, Shame, Differences in love language, Anxious-avoidant cycle of interaction, Emotional security and Ensuring that the group is safe.

Category "Difficulty of expressing emotions" included conversations about the challenges of discussing emotions as well as comments on the importance of learning to discuss, to improve the connection in the relationship. According to Enez (2021) painful emotions are often ignored and blocked. This leads to issues left unresolved and only a short-sighted benefit is achieved. In our study, difficulties in expressing one's own emotions were considered to arise from childhood's poor emotional climate more so than being a conscious attempt to hide emotions, yet especially male participants expressed being uncomfortable with being vulnerable. There was also a fear that expressing feelings could be punished. Discussions within the group members brought up the importance of breaking that harmful cycle with one's own children. Conversation revolved also around the comparison with other people's seemingly perfect relationships, and whether it is still possible to learn to talk about emotions as an adult.

The category "Shame" formed from discussions about feeling ashamed about one's own perceived bad behaviour towards their partner and about not being able to regulate their own behaviour in the relationship. In addition to feeling shame because of unconstructive behaviour, the feeling of shame often emerged when talking about needs and wants a participant might have had, as if having needs and hopes towards someone else, in this case their own partner, was somehow something to be ashamed of. Shame as emotion is very close to guilt, which Vrana and Greenberg (2018) describe to be secondary emotion, often hidden under another emotion. Also, in our study shame was sometimes hidden under other emotions such as guilt, anger, loneliness or perceived sinfulness, and it also emerged almost like an internal punishment when sharing painful intimate details about one's relationship to others.

The category “Differences in love language” contained discussions about the belief that the only valid way of showing love is via words. Misinterpreted or unnoticed acts of love caused frustration and feeling of disconnection. However, during the sessions participants' mindset began to shift and they started to entertain the idea that acts of care in daily life, such as peeling a pear for spouse or massaging shoulders, can also be a way of showing profound caring. Chapman (2017) has created the concept Five Love Languages, which contains Quality time, Words of affirmation, Acts of service, Receiving gifts, and Physical touch. According to him, love can be shown in many different ways, and the preferred ways differ amongst people. Mathew and Sasikala (2022) point out that a common reason for the end of relationships is a lack of experiencing and expressing love. An important result for the couples participating in our study was an increased understanding of both their own and their spouse's love language habits.

Category “Anxious-avoidant cycle of interaction” contained discussions about situations where one party withdraws in order to self-regulate their own emotions alone, while the other one anxiously seeks connection because of the need to regulate emotions together with the spouse. In the extracts, this kind of cyclical action led to the situation that neither of the couple was able to meet each other emotionally and were left in the grip of confusion, loneliness and feeling of emergency. As the therapy progressed, however, the participants' newly found understanding of their and their spouses behaviour patterns seemed to increase the understanding towards both themselves and their partner. Our findings are in line with former studies (Li & Chan, 2012; Stevens, 2014) that highlight the typical behavioural patterns in insecure anxious and avoidant relationships.

The comments in the “Emotional security” category were about wanting to feel emotionally secure with one's spouse. Some of the participants described how the harmful cyclical interactions made them feel lonely and realise the lack of emotional security in the relationship. Some commented on how difficult it was for their partner to accept the reality of being a normal, mistake-making human being, and this caused both insecurity and frustration. Also, unresponsiveness to spouse's feelings, satisfying spouse's feelings but simultaneously forgetting own needs, experiences of rejection and lack of everyday touching caused insecurity. Wiebe and Johnson (2017) explain that seeking security in a relationship is a natural need, and building a secure relationship can lead to an increase in resilience. According to them, EFT can help build security, and a secure relationship, in turn, promotes the strengthening of co-regulation skills.

According to Malat and Leszcz (2015) group therapy may contain risk for negative factors like an unresolved conflict within the group members. In our study, the category “Ensuring that the group is safe” contained situations where the peer commentator sensitively made sure that no offence

was taken over comments made by others. In one of these extracts, it appears that the man whose situation had been commented on felt he had to be defensive. We see that there is a potential risk in group therapy that even well-intentioned peer commentary can be hurtful. Fortunately, in the analysed sessions the atmosphere was safe and trusting as the group dynamics was healthy and the mental well-being of all participants was considered important.

It seems that both avoidant and anxious behaviour, even though they are the opposites of each other, still contain the same aspiration; the desire to achieve a sense of security. Although it may look like that the anxious partner is the only one trying to build better connection, and avoidance can be misinterpreted as wanting to disconnect, it is important to understand that avoidance of speaking about emotions can be a strategy not to cause any additional problems in a relationship. Therefore, also avoidant behaviour is paradoxically an effort to achieve a better connection in a relationship.

4.2 Evaluation of the research

It is worth noting that EFT is regarded to be most effective with couples who see the importance of recognising and verbalising their attachment related needs and who are willing to talk about the challenges of trust and lack of connection in the relationship (Johnson et al., 1999). In our study all participants took part in discussions in the therapy sessions and shared their own feelings and perspectives and commented on the stories of others. The abundance of spontaneous peer commentary made it possible to confidently answer the research question and find themes from the answers.

Since, as far as we know, emotion-focused couple psychotherapy has not previously been studied in a group format, this study produced interesting new information on the subject. It seems that the same type of themes emerged as in traditional EFT couple psychotherapy. However, a new insight is the perspective of peer support. We noticed that the motivation for the participants to share their own experiences to other couples was twofold: the participants wished to gain self-understanding of their own relationship situation, but were also happy to help others.

The study aimed to find out how participants in emotionally focused couples group therapy communicate spontaneously on each other's stories. In previous couple therapy studies on EFT, it has

not been possible to focus on peer commentary due to them not being in a group format. EFT in group format brings an additional dimension to the intercouple and patient-therapist dynamics and was thus an interesting subject to study. It seems that the advantage of couples group therapy and the peer commenting happening in that context reduces the experience of alienation as the couples realise they are not the only ones that have attachment style related relationship problems. When other couples share their challenges in group therapy, relationship problems start to appear as a natural part of life and so it can be assumed for example that the shame felt might be alleviated.

The obtained results can be put into practice by continuing to study group-based EFT sessions. Since this study was only the first paper on the subject, it is worth investigating the therapy clients' own experiences of the EFT group and examining the effectiveness of it. On the other hand, the possibility of harmful peer comments that may occur in the group must be remembered.

There were some challenges in the implementation of the research. The original idea was to analyse the therapy sessions with a precision similar to conversation analysis, but since we were not involved in the therapy sessions and only had access to the video recordings, it was challenging to follow the non-verbal communication. The expressions of all the participants were not visible in the recordings, and to some sessions few of the couples participated via Zoom. The sound quality of the recordings was lacking at times, which made it difficult to create some transcriptions. In some of the sessions, the participants also had surgical masks on their faces, which made it difficult to follow non-verbal communication. Also, looking closely at the data, areas of development can be observed. The original transcripts were made in Finnish from Finnish therapy recordings. Since the transcriptions contained dialect Finnish, the transcriptions translated into English may contain small inaccuracies.

For the optimal group dynamics in group therapy the ideal number of participants is around ten; Ezhumalai, Muralidhar, Dhanasekarapandian and Nikketha (2018) recommend 8-12 participants and Stewart, Usher and Allenby (2009) suggest 6-8 participants in their review. With an optimal number of participants, group members can receive peer support from each other, and on the other hand, if there were too many participants, some of the participants might more easily retreat to the background and would not be as likely to engage in personal sharing. Since only four couples participated in this study, and some of them were also absent from some sessions, the obtained results cannot be generalised to the basic population as such. However, the obtained results give important insight about the content of peer commenting.

Next, we examine the validity of the study. We researched group-based EFT and the target group was couples attending group-based EFT. We wanted to investigate how peers spontaneously comment on the stories of other couples in a group, and with this research question and the chosen analysis method, we were able to examine both the words used to give comments and analyse the

content of the comments. The information obtained is in line with previous studies on EFT. When looking at reliability, it must be noted that the obtained results cannot be reliably generalised to the basic population as it is, because this was the first study of its kind, and the size of the therapy group was chosen to be optimal from the view of group dynamics, in this case 8 participants. More research information on the subject is needed.

4.3 Conclusions and further research suggestions

According to Johnson (2019), during EFT, couples' negative interactions are at best transformed, giving space to new, more positive and compassionate perspectives on the relationship and the spouse. Changes include that the person gets into a better emotional connection with themselves and with each other. At the beginning of therapy, couples may describe difficulties in asking their spouse for what they need, but during therapy, one can learn to express their needs concretely. Johnson also mentions that initially negative interaction circles change to become more positive, and the interpretation of the other person and what the other person does also changes from a negative view to a more positive one. According to Johnson, the more anxious partner can at first be demanding, clingy and aggressive, but during therapy, often softens in their emotional expression. At the same time the withdrawn person suppresses attachment needs and emotional connection and focuses only on practical activities, but during therapy becomes more active and involved in the relationship; this, in turn, allows the anxious person permission to talk about their feelings without the partner shutting down. We noticed that similar themes were also repeated in the findings of our study. It seems that EFT in a group format carries at minimum the same benefits as EFT in couples therapy form. The discussed themes came out through vulnerable emotions and clingy or avoidant behaviour.

As for a suggestion for the development of group EFT, we pondered whether it would be beneficial to take time to deal with the worry that arises among others when one couple no longer attends the sessions. Even though any personal information cannot be shared, handling emotional reactions when group members abruptly leave the group could be appropriate. Such a sudden absence can cause insecurity in other participants, also in their own relationships; questions such as do they not come because they are sick, or did the relationship end, what happened, and can the same happen to us as well?

Referencing our study as a whole, one of the important insights the participants gained from couples group therapy seems to be that indeed everyone faces surprisingly similar challenges in their relationship, though these challenges are not generally talked about in daily life. All of the participating couples had different background stories and yet they all struggled with the same issues.

In the future, it would be important to repeat the group EFT sessions in order to ensure the reproducibility of similar results. As a proposal for further research, it could be useful to investigate in more detail also the occurrence of possible negative interruptions in the sessions, as well as the factors that contributed to the emergence of important insights during therapy. In connection with the sessions, a questionnaire was used to collect information about how the participants experienced the sessions. These forms were not used in our study, but in the future, analysing them could provide additional information in the study of what happened during the sessions that affected the subjective experience of the success of the session.

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