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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass,
It's about dancing in the rain" – Tiffany Wilson
"Meanings are not determined by situations, but we determine ourselves
by the meanings we give to situations" – Alfred Adler

The human condition is such that none of us will enjoy the good fortune of going through life without experiencing adversity, crisis or loss at some point. Metaphorically, events that constitute these difficulties are often likened to storms in terms of the intense disruption and the chaos or even destruction they bring about in human lives. Despite the ominous connotations attached to this common metaphor, the first quotation's juxtaposing of the storm with the rain it brings draws our attention towards the other side of the coin, namely: storms inherently carry with them the potential for newness and growth. Perhaps most striking is the choice implied in this quotation, namely waiting out the storm or dancing in the rain. It seems to suggest that rather than being defenseless souls, we play an important and determining part in the process of enduring the storm and in what may, or may not, emerge from the storm. Ultimately, as suggested by Adler, it is the complexities of our meaning making that define not only the storm, but also, more importantly, how we determine ourselves through our making of meaning in the stormy context.

This study will explore the relationships of couples dealing with the adversity, or storm, of stranger rape. Throughout the study the researcher uses the metaphor of a dance for the couple's relationship since it most poignantly captures the complexity, movement, rhythm, patterns, interconnectedness and interdependence of and between partners. Just like a dance, the couple's relationship is understood as constantly evolving or emerging from the partners' interactions, and therefore determined by them as they live life. The focus of this study will fall on how couples determine themselves by the dance and meanings they bring into the crisis of stranger rape, and the changes to their dance that emerge in a context traditionally described as devastating for individuals and relationships alike.

1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In the trauma literature stranger rape is recognised as an extremely traumatising event, constituting major adversity or crisis in the lives of victims and their significant others. Stranger rape has been extensively researched over the years, contributing a wealth of information and knowledge about the

impact of rape on the victim and those close to her. However, despite the prevalence of rape-trauma worldwide and the resources poured into research about rape, the amount of investigation in terms of exploring and gaining an in-depth understanding of couples' experiences of stranger rape has been very limited. The literature review has shown that studies regarding couples' experiences are often quantitative and superficial in nature, focusing on statistics of post-rape symptomatology as it presents in partners; the types and prevalence of resources available to couples; the percentage of rape victims that will benefit from being in a committed relationship; whether rape victims in committed relationships present with less or more problems post-rape; and the types and prevalence of relational problems in rape-traumatised couples (Earl, 1985; Maltz, 2002; Miller, Williams & Bernstein, 1982; Moss, Frank & Anderson, 1990). Furthermore, studies that took a more qualitative or in-depth approach, or combined a quantitative and qualitative approach, in the research process attempted to gain an understanding of couples' experiences by focusing on, approaching or involving either the rape victim **or** the partner, and not the couple as a unit (Connop & Petrak, 2004; Raath, 1995; Smith, 2005).

According to Bateson (1979), one can only generate a sense of a relationship as a whole through an act of double description, in other words, by obtaining a view from **both** sides of the relationship. This implies that a comprehensive understanding of couples' experiences of stranger rape can only be obtained by approaching and involving the couple, as a unit, in the research process. Thus, the ways in which couples dealing with such trauma were approached in the past, were not conducive to the development of an in-depth view and understanding of their experiences and relationships in the context of stranger rape. A void was consequently created in the field of rape research as these couples' voices were not adequately heard and this, in terms of clinical practice, limited the potential assistance that could be offered to these couples.

Approaching the rape victim and her partner on an individual basis seems to have been the result of applying the dominant individually focused psychological theories of the time to trauma research in general, and rape research specifically. Viewing stranger rape from an individual perspective, the focus fell either on the rape victim and her internal experiences, or, in line with the concept of secondary traumatisation, on the partner and his internal experiences of the rape victim's trauma (Flischer & Isaacs, 1995; Isac & Schneider, 1992; Malkah, Notman & Nadelson, 1976). In addition, and congruent with the dominant psychological theories of the time, stranger rape was viewed as impacting linearly on the rape victim while her trauma responses were seen as impacting linearly on her partner. The linear individually focused approach provided valuable insights regarding stranger rape-trauma, such as identifying post-rape individual symptoms, understanding secondary traumatisation in the context of stranger rape and identifying general parameters of what could be expected in terms of recovery and

healing for both the victim and her partner, which became known as rape-trauma syndromes (Bateman & Mendelson, 1989; Burgess & Holmstrom, 1985). However, many questions were left unanswered and even more questions emerged from these findings, such as why some rape victims or their partners do not neatly progress through the so-called stages of the individual rape-trauma syndromes, but rather seem to oscillate between stages, presenting with fluctuating levels of functioning over time. Furthermore these fluctuations appeared to hold no relationship to the time elapsed since the rape, and the victim or her partner often presented with lower levels of functioning some time after the rape, when compared to their functioning in the period immediately after the event.

These unanswered and emerging questions served as an impetus for researchers to widen the scope of their individually focused lenses, in order to include the interactions between partners in the post-rape context as well. From this perspective the reciprocal impact between the partners' individual characteristics, trauma adjustment stages, coping strategies and perceptions of the rape became evident (Remer & Ferguson, 1995; Van den Berg & Pretorius, 2000). The process of becoming aware of and taking these circular loops into consideration brought various new insights to the field of stranger rape-trauma. Researchers arrived at the conclusion that the abovementioned oscillation between adjustment stages was not only a reflection of individual adjustment post-rape, but also reflected the fit between the rape victim and her partner's adjustment stages. In this regard, Remer and Ferguson (1995) postulated that if partners progress through the said stages at the same pace, they are more likely to move smoothly towards recovery and less likely to experience relational problems. It was furthermore argued that if partners' adjustment stages are mismatched, in other words one partner progresses slower or quicker through the stages, relational problems are likely to emerge because partners may, for example, become frustrated, irritated or angry with one another, culminating in conflict or ineffective support between partners.

The above research findings constituted a promising development towards a focus on the couple and their relationship and provided a valuable conception of what happens between partners in the post-rape context. However, the research was also limited by the reality that despite acknowledging the partners' interactions in the post-rape context, these interactions were still viewed through a predominantly individual lens, resulting in partners' post-rape interactions not being linked with their larger and pre-existing relational processes, patterns and rules. In other words, rape became viewed as necessarily causing relational problems for couples. No connection was made between couples' pre-existing relational functioning and how this might reciprocally impact on the ways they deal with rape and the challenges and problems they face in the post-rape context. Thus, by isolating partners' post-rape interactions from the larger context of their relationship, the traditional linear view of stranger rape

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as "causing" problems or difficulties for individuals was merely transferred to couples' relationships. These shortcomings were recognised and Remer and Ferguson (1995) suggested that future research endeavours in the rape-trauma field look towards systems theory to address these limitations.

Researchers working with a wider range of traumas concurred that some dysfunction, frustration, conflict, distance and even competition between trauma victims and their partners appeared to be brought about by victims' and partners' adjustment difficulties in the post-trauma context. However, it was also found that viewing couples' relational problems as exclusively caused by adjustment difficulties in the aftermath of trauma was not only restrictive, but also did not adequately explain the degree of dysfunctionality or functionality observed in some traumatised couples (Balcom, 1996; Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998; Mills & Turnbull, 2001; Nelson & Wampler, 2000). It was suggested that widening the research lens and placing couples' post-trauma interactions within the larger context of their relationships and pre-existing relational and system dynamics, or processes, patterns and rules, might begin to explain some of the observed, but unexplained and poorly understood, dysfunctionality or functionality in traumatised couples. Once again it was suggested that systems theory with its focus on relational dynamics, as well as its circular view of causality, could be more effective in identifying and explaining the systemic effects observed in traumatised couples.

With the general trauma research field increasingly moving towards including a systemic approach, various relational dynamics were identified as pivotal in attempting to explore, explain and understand what happens in traumatised relational systems. Based on clinical and in-depth experience with individuals and their relationships in trauma, crisis or loss, Walsh (2003) identified pre-existing, or pre-trauma, system and relational dynamics that may be especially relevant for understanding how individuals and relationships persevere through adversity. Although she specifically set out to illustrate how these dynamics could contribute to healing, transformation and growth out of adversity, these resonate with system and relational dynamics identified by other researchers who also adopted a systemic stance. In this regard, in their examination of various research findings regarding traumatised couples, Goff and Smith (2005) identified similar dynamics at play in traumatised couple systems. Attempting to clarify the connection between trauma exposure and family processes, Kiser and Black (2005) also identified some of the dynamics highlighted by the above researchers. The dynamics identified by the abovementioned researchers include system structure; meaning-making processes; social action and internal and external patterns of connectedness; intimacy patterns; communication patterns; problem solving skills and strategies; conflict resolution strategies; patterns of emotional expression; patterns and balance of respect, support and nurturance; relational flexibility; adjustment

patterns; relational power and control as well as ongoing patterns of negotiation; relationship roles, rules and responsibilities; stability patterns; and the internal and external resources available.

Research specifically focusing on couples' experiences and relationships in the context of stranger rape is necessary, given the fact that researchers have consistently identified rape victims' intimate relationships as those taking most strain in the aftermath of rape. In addition, the vulnerability of the couple's relationship as a context which may amplify the negative impact of rape, as well as the potential of the relationship to serve as the primary context of healing, have also been repeatedly emphasised (Miller et al., 1982; Mills & Turnbull, 2004; Remer & Ferguson, 1995; Van den Berg & Pretorius, 2000). Despite the above findings and the previously mentioned developments towards a systemic approach in the general trauma field, a systemic investigation, aimed at exploring and gaining an in-depth understanding of couples' experiences of stranger rape and of their relationships in the context of such trauma, is still lacking. This gap in the stranger rape research field is particularly disconcerting given the high prevalence of rape world wide, and especially in South Africa, which translates into a significant number of traumatised relationships.

1.2 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The intention in undertaking the study is to begin to address the previously mentioned void in the rape-trauma literature by conducting an in-depth exploration and investigation of the personal and unique experiences and relational dynamics of couples who are dealing with stranger rape. By approaching and involving the couple, as a unit, in the research process, the researcher believes it is possible to gain an enhanced and deeper understanding of the experiences of couples dealing with such trauma, of their relational dynamics, as well as of the difficulties, challenges, vulnerabilities and potential of couples in the context of stranger rape. The study removes partners' interactions from the limiting post-rape vacuum and context to which these have been consigned in previous research endeavours and places these in the larger, rich context of the couple's relationship: taking note of the latter's co-constructed reality, pre-existing and ever-evolving relational dynamics, as well as relational and individual stories, the study may offer researchers, professionals and others working with stranger rape-trauma a different perspective on these couples, their experiences and relationships; one that moves beyond the traditional individual, linear and disconnected perspectives.

1.3 RESEARCH DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Given the study's stated focus on couples' personal experiences and relational dynamics, the chosen epistemology of the study is that of social constructionism, which falls within the philosophy of

postmodernism. Postmodernism and social constructionism both reject the notion of a singular or universal truth, thereby allowing for the existence of a multiverse of realities and many alternative accounts, meanings and descriptions. Therefore, social constructionism and postmodernism lend themselves well to the rationale of the study, as these perspectives will allow for the unique realities, voices and experiences of each couple to emerge from the research process. These philosophical bases also resonate well with the study's chosen systemic theoretical framework, which postulates that each couple's experiences of and responses to stranger rape will inherently fit with their system's or relationship's way of functioning. Post-modernism and social constructionism also concur in their view of the self, problems, meanings and experiences as being co-constructed and co-defined between, and emerging from, social interactions between individuals. This is likewise appropriate for the study, since a focus on couples' experiences of stranger rape and of their relationships regards these experiences, as well as the meanings and problems or challenges the couple may face, as co-constructed between the partners.

A qualitative research approach was chosen, given the sensitive nature of the research topic, which the researcher believed could be more fittingly addressed in in-depth interviews. The unstructured and in-depth format of the qualitative research interview also better illuminated and captured the complexity of experiences, relational dynamics and existing and emerging meanings of couples dealing with stranger rape, making a comprehensive understanding of these couples' experiences and relationships possible.

1.3.1   Aims of the study

The primary aim of this study is to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the unique personal experiences of couples dealing with stranger rape. In rape research much has been made of the impact of rape on individuals and their relationships, but very little is known about how couples' relationships and relationship functioning affect how couples deal with the rape. A second aim of this study is to address this uni-directional and limiting approach to trauma of this kind by conducting a systemic exploration of couples' experiences of their relationships before and after the rape, by means of placing their post-rape interactions in the larger contexts of their relationships in order to gain some insight into the relational and system dynamics at play in these couple systems and the reciprocal impact between these dynamics and the rape.

1.3.2 Sampling and Selection

Sampling in this study will be carried out according to purposive and convenience selection. Couples who fit the criteria of the study and who are willing to participate and discuss their experiences of stranger rape will be selected. The sample will consist of at least three couples, all involved in long term monogamous relationships before the rape occurred, and still committed to the same relationships at the time of participation in the study.

1.3.3 Data collection

Information will be collected using two sources: firstly requesting participants to write individual reflections of their personal experiences of the rape and secondly conducting joint, unstructured, in-depth interviews with each couple, as a unit, during which the couples' experiences of the rape and their relationships will be explored and reflected upon.

1.3.4 Data analysis

The interviews will be audio-taped and then transcribed. A hermeneutic approach will be used to analyse the information obtained from these interviews as well as from the participants' written individual reflections. While reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews and the written reflections, the researcher will immerse herself in the couples' stories and experiences, taking note of themes and patterns as these emerge.

1.4 CHAPTER OUTLINE

The following chapters will comprise this study:

Chapter 2: *Rape in context* contains a brief discussion of the development of the concept of trauma. Furthermore, the definition of rape as evolving within an ever-changing social context, and the changes in the definition over time, will be explained and elaborated upon. An overview of literature and research in the area of sexual trauma in general, and rape-trauma specifically, will be provided. The reader will be guided through the changing research focus in the area of rape-trauma, as it has shifted from an individual approach towards an approach that increasingly focuses on relationships.

Chapter 3: *A systemic framework* furnishes an explanation of family systems theory, highlighting the basic concepts and principles of the theory since it forms the framework for this study. This chapter also provides an overview of general trauma research and theoretical viewpoints where researchers and theorists have adopted a relational or systemic approach in their explorations.

Chapter 4: *Research design and methodology* contains the philosophical premises, namely postmodernism and social constructionism, upon which the research design of this study is based. Furthermore, a comprehensive explanation of the methodology applied in this study, namely a qualitative research approach and a hermeneutic method of data analysis, is furnished. Owing to the sensitive nature of the research subject, this chapter also provides a more detailed discussion of ethical concerns. At this point, however, it should be pointed out that in order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms have been used throughout the study and names of institutions, cities or suburbs have either been omitted or changed.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7: contain the researcher's interpretations of each couple's story which are discussed according to themes identified from the interviews conducted with the couples, as well as from the participants' individual written reflections. Given the richness of the couples' stories, it was decided to offer an account of each couple's experiences in a separate chapter.

Chapter 8: *Discussion and conclusion* contains an evaluation of the study's strengths and limitations, discusses the implications of the study and makes recommendations for future research.

1.5 CONCLUSION

Although stranger rape has been researched a great deal over the last few decades, efforts to explore and understand the relationships of couples dealing with such trauma have been complicated by ineffective approaches. In this process the complexities of these couples' dances (or relationships) were reduced to their post-rape interactions. By conducting an in-depth exploration of their personal experiences of stranger rape and of the reciprocal impact between couples' pre-existing relational dynamics and the said trauma, this study attempts to create a space where the richness of these couples' dances are explored.

CHAPTER 2

RAPE IN CONTEXT

This chapter aims to provide the reader with a clear understanding of the concepts of trauma, rape and stranger rape and to contextualise the definition of rape within the South African society. The chapter further reviews the literature on the subject of rape, in order to provide a context within which the reader may view this study.

2.1 DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRAUMA CONCEPT

Initially, traumatic events were viewed as rare occurrences affecting only a very limited number of individuals, for example war trauma (Allen, 1995; Catherall, 2004; Nelson & Wampler, 2000). During the past four decades, however, research has brought to light that trauma is a more common and daily occurrence in the life of individuals than originally thought. Events such as childhood sexual or physical abuse, natural disasters, serious motor vehicle accidents and illness are now viewed as traumatic experiences in their own right. The introduction of the diagnostic category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the third edition (1980) of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association* elevated the trauma field to a speciality within the domains of psychology, sociology and even philosophy (Williams & Sommer, 1994).

For an event or experience to be classified as "traumatic", it is not sufficient for it to be only described as extreme, brutal or life threatening. In addition to the aforementioned, the event or experience should also have a powerful impact on the individual, such as acute fear, a feeling of helplessness and a feeling of dread (Mills, 2001; Nelson & Wampler, 2000). The DSM-IV-TR defines a traumatic stressor or trauma as:

> *"...involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate"* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 463).

Certain authors have also distinguished between single traumatic events and recurring or multiple traumas. A single traumatic event is described as a once-off extremely stressful or catastrophic situation or period with immediately obvious effects and the eventual resolution of the situation or period, such as natural disasters, rape, robbery and hijackings. Recurring or multiple trauma refers to

those extremely stressful situations entailing an accumulation of exposure to traumatic situations, continuing over periods of months and even years, such as war situations, longstanding family violence or longstanding childhood sexual or physical abuse. Both single and multiple traumas create problems for individuals, their partners and families (Allen, 1995; Jordan, 2006; Mills & Turnbull, 2004).

The DSM-IV conceptualisation set the stage for viewing trauma through an individual lens (Nelson, Wangsgaard, Yorgason, Kessler & Carter-Vassol, 2002). As research in the trauma field has expanded our knowledge, the shortcomings of this individual lens have become increasingly clear. A definition of trauma extending beyond the individually focused lens or perspective is the following:

> *"Trauma begins with a stressor(s) defined as an event or situation that upsets the organism's (individual or family) equilibrium, requiring a righting response. This stressor must involve life-threat or threat to physical integrity and cause terror, helplessness…"* (Kiser & Black, 2005, p. 727).

From the above definition a further deduction can be made, namely that trauma may upset the equilibrium in an organism as a whole, or in any part of the organism. Thus, it seems that for an event, occurrence, experience or situation to be qualified as traumatic it should encompass the following features:

- an experience of serious harm, threat or death to the organism (i.e. the individual, family, community or any subsystem in the family or community) or the witnessing of such an event;
- it should be accompanied by emotions such as helplessness, dread, acute fear; and
- it should have an impact on the organism's life and functioning.

2.2 RAPE AS AN EVOLVING CONCEPT

Based on the aforementioned definitions of traumatic experiences, rape can be classified as a traumatic experience. Research continues to extend our knowledge and understanding of this phenomenon and as a result the concept of rape has been redefined over the years.

For many years the focus has fallen on the origins and reasons for the occurrence of rape and these have been strongly debated in research. One of the most common debates was whether or not rape can be viewed as a sexual act or an act of aggression and power. *"Rape…rather than being an expression of sexual desire, in fact is the use of sexuality to express issues of power and anger"* (Groth, Burgess & Holmstrom, 1977, p. 1239). A more recent version of this debate can be found in the controversial evolutionary theory of rape, which primarily postulates viewing rape as adaptive, or alternatively as the by-product of other adaptive characteristics (Archer & Vaughan, 2001). This theory holds that rape is

inherent in men's nature and primarily sexually motivated, and is not the product or function of power in a male-dominated society. This theory seems to have refocused attention on the age-old power versus sexual desire debate. In contrast, the cognitive model of rape holds that men's cognitions play an important role in their desire to rape, and that there are important similarities between rapists in terms of their thinking regarding rape, sex, women and themselves (Ryan, 2001). It is still not clear why rapists rape, but the abovementioned theories have had, and still have, an important impact on how rape is defined and understood in present society.

Generally and in most countries, rape was initially defined as an act performed by a man against a woman, involving sexual penetration of the vagina with the penis, and was accomplished by an actual or implied threat of severe bodily harm (Sutherland & Scherl, 1970). Later definitions described rape as the non-consensual sexual penetration of an **individual**, by using physical force, threat, or bodily harm, and also in cases where the individual is unable to or incapable of giving consent, for example in the case of mental retardation, intoxication or mental illness (Cowan, 2000; McEwan, De Man & Simpson-Housley, 2002). From the above it is clear that the second definition is more inclusive, as it does not make specific reference to the use of the genitalia in a circumscribed manner and is also not gender-specific, thereby implying that both men and women can be victims, as well as perpetrators, of rape.

Within the South African context until recently, rape was defined as unlawful, intentional intercourse by a male with a female without her consent (Milton, 1999; Van der Merwe, Conradie & Labuschagne, 1997). When compared to the above definition, it is evident that this definition has serious shortcomings in terms of gender, is limited in the nature and extent of rape or sexual assault described, and provides minimal support for rape victims. Throughout the years it became increasingly evident that rape and sexual assault victims are not exclusively female, and that rape or sexual assault is not limited to so-called intercourse, that is, penetration of the vagina with the penis. In 1999 the South African Law Commission suggested replacing the common law definition of rape with a statutory one, which implied fundamental changes to the traditional conceptualisation of rape and sexual assault in South African law (Van der Merwe, 2001).

However, the Amendment Act was passed only in December 2007. This act broadened the definition of rape to include the following (Criminal Law – Sexual Offences and Related Matters – Amendment Act, No. 32, 2007):
- Forced vaginal, anal or oral sex, irrespective of the gender of the victim or perpetrator;
- Sexual penetration with an inanimate object or animal genitalia.

The act also makes provision for other changes, such as allowing victims to legally compel the perpetrator to undergo HIV-testing and for the results to be disclosed to the victim. Thus, the South African definition of rape was comprehensively extended by the above changes. It now reflects the globally accepted conceptualisations of rape and sexual assault and also acknowledges uniquely South African issues, such as the exceptionally high HIV-infection rate.

In addition to the statutory definition of rape, some researchers have identified four possible types of rape, namely stranger rape, acquaintance rape, date rape and partner rape (Cowan, 2000). Stranger rape refers to a sexual attack where the victim and perpetrator are unknown to one another. Acquaintance rape denotes a sexual attack where the victim and the perpetrator were related to one another, either through familial ties or other social ties, such as through a mutual friend or work colleague. Date rape refers to a sexual attack where the perpetrator has taken the victim on a date, or to a social engagement, and then raped the victim afterwards. The victim and perpetrator may or may not have known one another for a period of time prior to the rape. Lastly, partner rape signifies a sexual attack that occurs in an established intimate relationship, where there have been previous consensual sexual encounters.

From the above, it is therefore clear that rape, regardless of the type, can be classified as a traumatic experience. Furthermore, throughout the years, society has come to acknowledge that although rape is a crime committed overwhelmingly against women, any person can be a victim of rape. In addition, the conceptualisation of rape has had to be extended to include more than merely sexual intercourse, in order to acknowledge the different ways in which a person can be sexually violated. Lastly, from the above it was also clear that South African rape victims face certain unique challenges, such as the very real possibility of HIV-infection, following a rape attack.

Thus, from the above it is possible to see how the concepts of trauma and rape have been transformed over the years. In line with these changes in concepts, researchers have also continuously adjusted the manner in which they have conducted their research regarding rape. The next section explores the different approaches researchers have taken in their quest to explore and understand the dynamics of such an event.

2.3 THE DYNAMICS OF RAPE

Rape has been researched for many decades, yet its origin and impact on victims' lives are still not fully understood. From the literature review it was clear that the focus in this field has shifted throughout the years from a focus on individual victims to one on the relationships of victims.

Although these shifts have provided answers and a deeper understanding of the experience of rape victims and their significant others, many more unanswered questions have been exposed.

This process is furthermore complicated by the fact that rape is an interpersonal crime occurring in a constantly changing social context. As a result its understanding is influenced not only by research findings, but also by various myths and misconceptions regarding rape, as well as by the experience of rape victims and their significant others in dealing with the rape (Feinauer, 1982; Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983; Van den Berg & Pretorius, 2000; Van der Merwe et al., 1997; White & Rollins, 1981). Thus, there appears to be a recursive dynamic between researching and understanding the rape phenomenon, its impact on people's lives and the social context in which it occurs, which seems to both contribute to and complicate our understanding of rape-trauma.

2.3.1 Stranger rape and the individual focus

Initially, research was limited to a focus on the rape victim, her experience of the ordeal and how she dealt with, or could be assisted to deal with the trauma. Viewing rape-trauma through an individual lens, researchers attempted to explain the victim's inner experience at the time of the attack, the emotional, psychological and physical sequelae of the attack, the implication(s) of the attack for the victim's personality structure and psychological functioning as well as to explore how the victim's personality structure and psychological functioning simultaneously impacted on her ability to deal with and integrate the rape-trauma (Flischer & Isaacs, 1995; Gore-Felton, Gill, Koopman & Spiegel, 1999; Isac & Schneider, 1992; Kilpatrick, Veronen & Best, 1985; Malkah et al., 1976; Mezey & Taylor, 1988).

Various linear models were formulated, proposing different stages or phases in the rape victim's recovery process. The best known of these models is Burgess and Holmstrom's Rape Trauma Syndrome, formulated in the mid-seventies after studying the typical emotional, psychological and behavioural patterns of rape victims in the period following the attack (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993; Malkah et al., 1976). The Rape Trauma Syndrome described the intrapsychic experiences of rape victims and consequences of the attack, regardless of the type of rape victims were exposed to. This syndrome consists of the following phases:

- The **acute phase**, which is defined as the immediate response and can last from a few days to a few weeks after the attack. This phase occurs in response to the traumatic experience of being raped and is characterised by complete disruption and disorganisation of the victim's life. Victims' responses vary widely during this phase and include reactions such as crying, emotional numbing or even laughing. Victims may describe dissociations from the body, feelings of humiliation, confusion,

feelings of uncleanliness, shame, guilt, nightmares, heightened anxiety and also various physical concerns regarding injuries sustained during the attack, the possibility of pregnancy, or infection with sexually transmitted diseases.

- The **reorganisation phase** is characterised by the victim's attempts to reorganise her life and attempts to recreate her pre-rape life. The victim attempts to resume normal routines and activities, but these attempts are often complicated by anxiety, fear, denial, hypervigilance, flashbacks and feelings of guilt, shame and often helplessness. In addition, the victim may also experience the loss of a sense of security and she may find it difficult to trust other people. Thus, she may experience difficulties in interpersonal relationships and may become isolated and disconnected from those around her. The victim may also experience difficulties in sexually intimate relationships as a result of the attack. These reactions may continue for a few months or even years, despite the victim's attempts to return to a normal life.

As research in the trauma field expanded, and with emergence of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder concept, researchers investigated the similarities between the Rape Trauma Syndrome and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. They found evidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder amongst rape victims (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1985; Kilpatrick et al., 1985). In this regard, other researchers found that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was more common amongst rape victims than amongst any other type of interpersonal trauma. According to these researchers, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms shown most frequently by rape victims are: avoidance behaviours, hypersensitivity, concentration difficulties and intensified symptoms when exposed to rape-related cues (Gore-Felton et al., 1999; Herman, 1992).

In addition to the abovementioned symptoms and responses related to the Rape Trauma Syndrome and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, other symptoms and responses, not necessarily regarded as part of the above symptom or response clusters, were also identified. These included, but were not limited to, the following: poor self-esteem and self-worth, over-dependence and autonomy difficulties, feelings of inferiority, obsessive-compulsive behaviours, depression, sexual dysfunctions, other anxiety disorders such as generalised anxiety disorder, grief reactions, and alcohol and drug dependency (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983; McEwan et al., 2002; Mills & Turnbull, 2001; Sarker & Sarker, 2005; Van den Berg & Pretorius, 2000).

Although the focus on victims of various types of trauma has provided researchers with valuable information, it became increasingly evident that the significant others of the victims also presented with myriad problems and symptoms in the aftermath of trauma, that these problems and symptoms

impacted on the victim and also that they were often similar or related to those of the victim (Bateman & Mendelson, 1989; Cohen, 1988; Galovski & Lyons, 2004; Nelson & Wampler, 2000; Remer & Ferguson, 1995).

This awareness brought about a shift in the research focus and although the focus expanded to include the significant others in the lives of the victims, it remained on individuals. In the literature, the impact of the trauma victim's ordeal and subsequent behaviour on significant others has been subsumed under concepts such as "secondary traumatic stress", "indirect or vicarious trauma", and "secondary victims". Essentially, all these concepts refer to the danger, disruption and distress experienced by significant others, created by the victim's distress and resulting from close proximity to the victim. According to these researchers, "secondary" does not mean that these victims are less important or less affected than primary trauma victims. The term merely indicates that they were not the direct receivers of the initial traumatic event (Catherall, 2004; Davis, Taylor & Bench, 1995; Kiser & Black, 2005).

In the context of rape-trauma, focus on secondary victims meant researchers focused their attention mainly on the family members of the victims, and especially the victim's partner or husband. Symptoms and responses similar and different to those of the rape victims were found amongst partners and husbands, including confusion; feelings of inadequacy; helplessness; uselessness; panic; lower self-worth and self-esteem; feeling violated; anger towards both the victim and the perpetrator; indirect expression of anger and resentment towards the victim; protective and avoidance activities; guilt; shame; sexual difficulties, including avoidance of sexual activity and sexual dysfunction; depression; frustration; jealousy and concern about implications for their relationship (Bateman & Mendelson, 1989; Cohen, 1988; Goff & Smith, 2005; Mio & Foster, 1991). Some researchers also found evidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms, including flashbacks, amongst partners regardless of the fact that they did not witness the attack (Davis et al., 1995; Van den Berg & Pretorius, 2000).

Similar to the Rape Trauma Syndrome, Bateman and Mendelson (1989) described a characteristic psychological and behavioural syndrome in partners of rape victims, consisting of the following phases:

- The **anger phase** invariably directed towards the rapist and lasting approximately five to seven days.
- The **protective phase** during which avoidance activities are prominent. The partners may engage in behaviour such as securing the house, regardless of where the rape took place; accompanying the victim everywhere, or insisting that the victim keeps in contact at all times; avoidance of television programmes containing scenes of violence or sexual activity; scanning written media such as

magazines or newspapers and removing any references to rape or sexual assaults. This phase is marked by anxiety, tension and restlessness.

- The **depressive phase** during which guilt and sexual difficulties may emerge, which may include avoidance of sexual activity. The researchers also found that it is often the partner who avoids sexual activity, rather than the victim, and they explained this response as due to his identification with the rapist.

These and other researchers, as well as clinicians working therapeutically with rape and sexual abuse victims, realised and began emphasising the interconnectedness between the victim and her partner, in that not only do the victim's responses, symptoms and ways of dealing with the trauma impact on the partner, but the partner's responses, difficulties and ways of dealing with the trauma also affected the victim. Existing individual models were modified and adjusted as researchers and clinicians became increasingly aware of the interpersonal impact of rape and the interconnectedness of the victim and partner's responses and syndromes in the aftermath of the attack. These models became increasingly less linear in their acknowledgement of what happens between the victim and partner in the post-rape context and took into account pre-existing levels of individual functioning, relational aspects, the intra-individual and inter-individual impact, and the chaotic nature of adjustment in the aftermath of rape. In addition, the newer models also divided the process into individual and relational levels and emphasised the open-endedness of the trauma process (Barnes, 1995; Miller & Sutherland, 1999; Miller et al., 1982; Nelson & Wampler, 2000; Remer & Ferguson, 1995; Van den Berg & Pretorius, 2000).

Despite adjustments in these models and acknowledgement of the interpersonal impact of rape-trauma, they essentially maintained an individual focus while highlighting the interconnectedness of individual processes. Aspects of relationships affected by rape were identified and references were made to relational processes; however, what these processes were, how they presented and a thorough exploration and understanding of these processes and their interplay with individual trauma processes were still lacking. Nevertheless, researchers acknowledged the limitations of these models and agreed that investigators should look to systemic theories as a guideline for the investigation and exploration of relational processes in the context of trauma, specifically rape-trauma (Barnes, 1995; Moss et al., 1990; Nelson & Wampler, 2000; Remer & Ferguson, 1995).

2.3.2 Stranger rape and a relational focus

Following the awareness of the impact of trauma on victims' significant others, researchers increasingly realised the impact of trauma on relationships. According to Mills and Turnbull (2004),

trauma alters the victim's ability to relate to others and, in addition, the ability of other people to relate to trauma victims will also be different. As mentioned above, in the context of rape, the focus fell mainly on the rape victim's relationship with her intimate partner and over the years researchers identified various relationship dimensions or aspects affected by rape.

Higher levels of disturbance of relationships were found amongst rape victims and their partners (Connop & Petrak, 2004). The main relationship aspects or dimensions identified by researchers seem to be the following: sexual, emotional, social and communication dimensions as well as practical and supportive aspects (Barnes, 1995; Maltz, 2002; Miller et al., 1982; Mills, 2001; Mills & Turnbull, 2004). Although these dimensions are discussed separately in the next section, it is important to keep in mind that they are interlinked and therefore any division or separation is undertaken merely to order the presentation of research findings in the context of this study.

i)   Sexual dimension

The impact of rape on the sexual dimension of the couple's relationship has generally been researched in terms of the clear-cut concepts of sexuality and sexual dysfunction. Some researchers defined intimacy in mainly sexual terms and investigated sexual dysfunction and problems in light of this limited conceptualisation of intimacy. In contrast, others defined and researched intimacy as an over-arching and multi-layered process in the couple's relationship (Mills & Turnbull, 2001; Mills & Turnbull, 2004). In this study the researcher adheres to the latter view where intimacy is understood to be a multi-layered process between partners with sexuality only one aspect or part of this larger process.

Given the nature of a rape attack, the impact on the sexual aspect of the couple's relationship is often the predominant focus of research and therapy, even though researchers have pointed out that sexual dysfunction is not the exclusive legacy of sexual trauma (De Silva, 2001; Mills & Turnbull, 2004). However, the same researchers found that sexual trauma carried a higher risk for the development of sexual problems and dysfunctions when compared to other non-sexual traumas. As should be evident from the discussion regarding individual symptoms, both the rape victim and her partner often present with sexual concerns, problems and dysfunctions in the aftermath of the attack. These problems are varied and may be limited to a single sexual problem or dysfunction, but may also include more than one, which may be of brief duration or persist over a long period of time.

Sexual difficulties identified by researchers included desire disorders; arousal disorders; experiencing negative feelings such as anger, disgust or guilt with regards to touch; feeling emotionally distant

during sex or dissociating during intercourse; compulsive or inappropriate sexual behaviours; anorgasmia; vaginismus; painful intercourse for both the victim and partner; erectile dysfunction; premature ejaculation; avoidance of sexual intimacy; sex-related phobias; traumatic flashbacks; sexual unresponsiveness and sexual contact that is less frequent and less pleasurable (Barnes, 1995; Connop & Petrak, 2004; Maltz, 2002; Miller et al., 1982).

Some researchers viewed sexual symptoms as trauma reactions of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, namely hypersensitivity, withdrawal, dissociation and avoidance, and stated that victims "...are either having an unpleasant reaction or trying to avoid having an unpleasant reaction to what happens during sex" (Maltz, 2002, p. 323). In a similar approach, some researchers looked towards classical conditioning theory for an explanation (Becker, Skinner, Abel, Axelrod & Cichon, 1984). It was suggested that the assault situation may be understood as an unconditioned stimulus, evoking anxiety and fear, that the sexual aspect of the assault then becomes conditioned to elicit a negative response that generalises to other sexual situations, which in turn, leads to problems whenever the couple attempts to resume the sexual aspect of the relationship.

Contrary to the above, some researchers criticised classical conditioning theory as not providing an adequate explanation for the fact that both the victim and her partner experienced sexual problems (Connop & Petrak, 2004). They argued that the couple's sexual problems might be more related to social discourses about rape and the impact of these on the way in which the couple made sense of and attributed meaning to the attack. In this regard they mentioned the insidious impact of rape myths on the couple's meaning-making process, post-assault. These myths include beliefs such as: women lie about being raped, rape is precipitated through the victim's provocative clothing or behaviour, rape is "just sex" or that perpetrators of rape are mad men and therefore easily identified, which implies negligence or irresponsibility on the part of the victim. It was argued that these myths, and a person's view of rape, are especially pivotal in the guilt, shame and anger responses both partners felt subsequent to the attack and they often impacted on how the couple related sexually, post-attack.

Various researchers also found that couples avoided sexual intercourse, post-attack, especially due to concerns that it might trigger traumatic memories. Some suggested that avoidance be seen as functional rather than dysfunctional, based on the premise that avoidance of activities which trigger traumatic memories may initially assist in stabilising the couple in the chaotic post-attack period (Maltz, 2002). In this regard, sexual difficulties are viewed as normal and natural long-term consequences of sexual trauma. However, although functional at some point in time and a normal response to sexual trauma, researchers consistently established that avoidance of sexual activity later does become a problem for

the couple (Barnes, 1995; Miller et al., 1982; Mills & Turnbull, 2004). Taking a different approach, some researchers suggested that sexual difficulties are the result of developing escape mechanisms, such as repression, denial and dissociation, which are necessary to deal with the rape (Talmadge & Wallace, 1991). Denial of one's sexuality and resultant avoidance of sexual activity can therefore be understood as a way of dealing with unresolved feelings about the rape (Barnes, 1995).

Some researchers, who acknowledged that sexual dysfunctions could be the result of the sexual nature of a rape attack, also identified communication difficulties between partners, such as conflict, misunderstandings and misinterpretations, as another possible cause (Barnes, 1995). Returning to sexual activities is often complicated by the disruption of the couple's communication process following the attack (Miller et al., 1982). This often brings about a situation where one of the partners feels the need to initiate sexual contact, but fears openly discussing such a step due to the impact it may have on the other partner. According to these researchers, the failure to communicate prevents partners from being aware of and understanding one another's needs and desires.

It was furthermore found that sexual difficulties were just one aspect of the closeness difficulties which these couples experienced after the rape. Chauncey (1994) established that partners were especially confused, hurt and frustrated by their failed attempts to be close to their partners in non-sexual ways. Their attempts at closeness would often be destroyed by or trigger anxiety, flashbacks, anger or withdrawal by the victim. The partners' feelings of hurt and confusion seemed to be confounded by the victims' apparent willingness to be close to and involved with others, such as extended family members, friends and colleagues, but to the exclusion of their partners. Cohen (1988) found that partners were often more concerned about the loss of closeness and connectedness in general, than about the sexual aspect of the relationship specifically.

From the above it is clear that the sexual dimension of the couple's relationship is significantly affected by the occurrence of rape. It also appears that sexual problems are only a part of more encompassing problems relating to closeness and connectedness within the relationship. Researchers provided various explanations for the array of post-rape sexual problems found amongst couples, but also felt that sexual dysfunction and problems might have a so-called "systemic etiology". This probably also explains Chauncey's (1994) and Cohen's (1988) findings. Researchers suggested that a family therapy or systemic approach could be more appropriate for the treatment of these couples, due to the fact that these approaches considered relational dynamics, in other words relational processes, patterns and rules, which may function to maintain or exacerbate sexual problems (Barnes, 1995).

Sexual dysfunction in the post-rape context has been treated therapeutically in a number of ways, including gaining a better and deeper understanding of what happened and how it affects sexuality, preventing negative sexual behaviours, coping with unpleasant reactions to touch, learning new skills for experiencing touch and sexual sharing in safe ways, cognitive-behavioural therapy focusing on negative belief systems, and sexual genograms (Barnes, 1995; Mills & Turnbull, 2004). Essentially, "...couples learn to work as a team and approach intimacy in new ways which emphasise communication, choice, equality, respect, trust and safety" (Maltz, 2002, p. 324). Thus, it also appears that in treating sexual dysfunction in the post-rape context, the focus falls on more than treating trauma-related symptoms, that is, also on relationship dynamics, which seems to support the move towards a systemic approach to sexual trauma.

ii) Practical and supportive aspects

Relationships, and especially long term intimate relationships, are generally characterised by reciprocal support, nurturing and caregiving, interdependence, and division in terms of responsibilities and work, such as child-care, taking care of household duties as well as responsibilities in terms of providing an income. Due to the impact of trauma on both the victim and partner, it can be expected that there will be disruptions in these aspects as well. In the context of rape, research has consistently shown how disruption of these aspects impacts on the relationship and its quality.

Researchers found reduced autonomy amongst rape victims and discovered that victims became increasingly dependent on partners, which led to increased efforts by the latter to provide the needed support (Emm & McKenry, 1988; Miller et al., 1982). Such support ranged from practical support, for example increased involvement or changes in the division of domestic chores and child-care, to emotional support such as sympathy, affection, comfort and reassurance whenever the rape victim became distressed.

In this regard, Chauncey (1994) established that partners often felt afraid of hurting the victim, or even feared losing the relationship, if they did not attend to her every need. As a result, partners supported the victim, even if it was at the expense of their own autonomy and integrity. In addition, they also felt guilty about their own need for support and expressed the fear that expression of their needs might lead to the victim being overwhelmed with anxiety or anger. These concerns naturally contributed to the distress which the partner had already experienced as a result of the rape.

Davis et al. (1995) investigated the relationship between the partner's distress and his ability to provide support to the trauma victim. They found that high levels of distress amongst partners did not interfere

with their ability to provide support, but that these levels were associated with higher degrees of unsupportive behaviours, such as egocentric behaviour, emotional withdrawal and victim-blaming. Another significant finding was that higher levels of unsupportive behaviour were more likely amongst partners of sexual assault victims than those of non-sexual assault victims. In this regard, Connop and Petrak (2004) also discovered that rape victims may experience anger and blame from their partners as well as support and understanding. These researchers also ascribed relationship disturbances to difficulties in communication and emotional support and pointed out that the relationship is often characterised by a lack of reciprocity of support.

According to Smith (2005) the partner of a sexual assault victim is expected to be supportive and to meet the victim's needs, even before his own difficulties or needs are known. Thus, the partner is required to provide support at a time when he also needs support. As a result, the partner's efforts to be supportive are undermined by his own needs for support and by the external pressures of additional responsibilities and commitments, such as the possible disability of the victim, increased duties in terms of the child-care and having to deal with the possible intrusive and increased attention and involvement by extended family members as well as law authorities. In certain studies partners felt that they could bear to suppress their own needs in terms of support for a period of time in order to assist the victim through the crisis, but were unsure whether they would be able to sustain this indefinitely (Chauncey, 1994; Cohen, 1988). Smith (2005) postulated that the critical, unsupportive, inappropriate and negative behaviour sometimes observed in partners, may possibly be a manifestation of their own difficulties and struggle to cope, to find support and to suppress their own needs for comfort and reassurance in the aftermath of rape.

As may be seen from the above, in addition to the impact of lack of reciprocity in support-giving following the rape, the couple's relationship is furthermore strained by the indefinite nature of the victim's distress and need for support. Miller et al. (1982) found that partners initially attempted to provide the support needed, but that exhaustion, frustration and confusion, due to the victim's baffling symptoms and responses, eventually eroded their ability to provide adequate and effective support. The combination of unmet needs, exhaustion, confusion and frustration may contribute to problematic systemic effects: for example, the partner may become angry and may withdraw, or may become aggressive or abandon the relationship as a result, which inevitably produces more distress for both the victim and the partner, prolongs the healing process for both and increases their respective needs for support (Chauncey, 1994; Cohen, 1988; Goff & Smith, 2005). Thus, from the above research it would appear that the nature of rape-trauma is such that it erodes the very supportive aspects the couple requires in order to negotiate the trauma effectively.

iii) Emotional dimension

As is evident from the discussions above, both partners endure an array of confusing and terrifying emotions in the aftermath of rape. Furthermore, the impact of rape on the emotional dimension of the relationship is significantly influenced by the couple's level or degree of intimacy, both in terms of non-sexual and sexual aspects, as well as by how supported each partner feels in the post-rape context. Various research studies discovered increased aggression in the intimate relationships of rape victims, with both the victim and the partner being aggressive at times. Researchers seem to differ in their opinions regarding the appropriateness of aggression responses in these couples, with some viewing it as a normal response, while others viewed it as damaging and to be avoided or prevented at all costs (Miller et al., 1982; Mills & Turnbull, 2004).

In this regard, aggression and anger from the victim was explained in terms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, flashbacks, or anger towards the perpetrator being displaced on the partner. The concept of the victim displacing her anger onto her partner is a theme which is consistently identified in qualitative studies undertaken with partners of rape and sexual abuse victims. Partners are often reported as feeling both confused and angered about having to bear the brunt of the victim's aggression (Chauncey, 1994; Cohen, 1988).

Researchers postulated that the partner's aggression is brought about by his frustration with the victim's increased dependency and continued anxiety, with his increasingly ineffective attempts to help her, as well as with his own unmet needs. This frustration leads to resentment, anger and even rage, which may frighten the victim or remind her of the attack, thereby increasing her anxiety. Researchers also established that the partner often expressed excessive anger towards the perpetrator, to the extent that the victim began to fear that the partner would act irresponsibly, or found herself in a position where she had to defend the perpetrator in order to counteract or regulate the partner's aggression (Chauncey, 1994; Cohen, 1988; Remer & Ferguson, 1995).

Furthermore, the partner's anger or aggression was found to be often related to issues of blaming. In this regard partners often blamed the victim for the occurrence of the attack, and themselves for failure to prevent the attack, or failure to adequately protect the victim (Connop & Petrak, 2004; Davis et al., 1995; Miller et al., 1982; Mills, 2001). From the above it appears that these couples often become caught in a cycle where anxiety, blame, dependency and unmet needs breed resentment, anger and aggression in a self-perpetuating manner.

In addition to the above, various researchers found that these couples experience significant loss, sadness and grief following the attack. According to Mills and Turnbull depression is a common reaction to loss and may include "...feeling down, sad, hopeless or despairing" (Mills & Turnbull, 2004, p. 278). As mentioned above, the victim often displays symptoms of depression and as a result, she may have lost motivation and interest in activities, people and relationships, and may increasingly withdraw into herself. This may leave the partner isolated and feeling rejected. In addition, the victim's depression and hopelessness may also precipitate self-injurious behaviours, which may leave the partner feeling frightened, anxious, concerned, angry and, once again, rejected. Shame, guilt and depression experienced by both partners often intensify their isolation and disconnectedness.

Mills (2001) found that ninety percent of couples, in which one or both partners were suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, were unable to share their grief with one another and, as a result, these couples were also significantly hampered in resolving challenges brought about by exposure to rape. He further established that mutual understanding and empathy were almost impossible in these couples. Miller et al. (1982) also established a mutual lack of empathic understanding for one another's psychological state in these couples. They suggested that this might possibly be due to the intense emotionality of each partner following the attack, and as a result both could be unable to distance themselves sufficiently from their own emotions in order to consider and attend to each other's emotions. Taking a slightly different approach, some researchers were of the opinion that both aggression and difficulties in empathic sharing were related to attachment issues in the individuals and suggested that these be investigated as avenues for future research (Mills, 2001; Mills & Turnbull, 2004).

Although not all rape victims eventually develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the higher incidence of these type of symptoms amongst rape victims is possibly an indication that victims and their partners experience significant difficulty in negotiating and regulating their own and one another's emotions, as well as their response to one other's emotions, in the post-rape context. Hence, it is evident that the emotional climate of the couple's relationship is significantly impacted by rape, bringing about changes in the way the couple regulates their own and one another's emotions in the aftermath of the attack. These changes in the couple's emotional climate, in turn, seem to perpetuate the impact of the trauma as time goes on.

iv) Communication dimension

Researchers have repeatedly reported findings in terms of poor, ineffective or disrupted communication in the intimate relationships of rape victims. The disturbance of the couple's communication pattern is

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often regarded as the most damaging consequence of rape and from the literature review it was clear that the communication pattern can be disrupted in various ways (Emm & McKenry, 1988; Miller et al., 1982).

According to Mills and Turnbull (2004) the initial shock and numbing experienced by rape victims effectively obstructs the possibility of emotional expression, and therefore also effective communication, in the relationship. From the partner's perspective, his emotional expression is often also hampered by feelings of numbness, or alternatively by feeling overwhelmed with additional responsibilities, as well as concerns about protecting the victim. As a result, he is not able to communicate his emotions effectively. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the partner also suppresses his own needs during this time and often feels that he needs to protect the victim from his own fears and anger. These aspects effectively bring the couple's communication to an impasse.

The above researchers also found that couples may deny the occurrence of the rape. The victim may choose not to disclose the rape to the partner, or may attempt to minimise the impact of the rape. The partner may enter into his own state of denial by encouraging the victim to "pull herself together and get on with life". By reducing feelings of helplessness and horror, as well as fears about abandonment and doom, denial can be seen as an adaptive response to the turmoil brought about by rape. It also serves the function of restabilising the couple system and enables the couple to continue with their daily routines and responsibilities.

However, denial also sets the stage for misinterpretations, unavailability of support, suppression of needs as well as for prohibiting the discussion of any problems that may arise later, and thereby seriously disturbs the couple's communication pattern. Couples' therapists found that couples were often not aware of the role the rape might have played in their present difficulties and often did not report a history of sexual trauma, unless therapists specifically enquired about it. In cases where couples disclosed the occurrence of rape, they often denied or minimalised the impact of the trauma (Barnes, 1995).

In contrast, some researchers established that couples attempted to discuss the rape, but that these discussions were more problematic than helpful. Discussions often led to arguments and placed even more strain on the relationship, which often brought about active avoidance of any rape discussions (Connop & Petrak, 2004). However, one would suspect that not talking about such a traumatic event in itself has the potential of being equally problematic, due to the misconceptions, misinterpretations and resultant resentment and anger that may arise in a context where discussion of the rape is prohibited. It

also seems that couples then misattribute these problems to other sources, such as individual attitudes and individual pathology (Barnes, 1995).

In addition, researchers discovered that the partner's communication with the victim is often complicated by the fact that he does not know what to say to the victim, or that he is often intensely curious and preoccupied with the details of the attack, but fearful that his preoccupation would upset or alienate the victim. As a result, the partner often becomes anxious, apprehensive and concerned about saying something which may add to the victim's distress. In turn the victim, often concerned about acceptance from her partner, as well as concerned about her own worthiness and desirability, misinterprets the partner's apprehensiveness and reservation as rejection or disgust. This may set in motion a cycle of blame, guilt, shame, anger and resentment which serves to further disrupt future attempts at communication about the rape, their emotions, needs and fears (Emm & McKenry, 1988; Smith, 2005).

One way for the couple to possibly address the communication impasse would be to communicate about the way they are communicating, or meta-communicate about their communication pattern. However, the intense emotionality of each individual, and the lack of mutual understanding and empathy mentioned earlier, complicate and often preclude both partners' ability to take meta-positions. Due to the fact that communication is such a basic dimension of any relationship, the disruption of the couple's communication pattern then compounds the problems and disconnection couples experience in other dimensions of their relationship.

v) Social dimension

As the concept of secondary traumatisation suggests, everyone in close contact with the rape victim may also be traumatised by the rape, and this may include the victim's children, extended family, friends and even colleagues. In addition, these members of the victim and couple's support system also hold their own preconceived ideas of rape and may be equally influenced by prevailing rape myths and misconceptions. Research has shown that this may affect their ability to provide adequate support, nurturance and comfort to the victim as well as to the couple (Davis et al., 1995).

In addition to the above, the couple themselves may, through their behaviours as individuals or their behaviours as a couple, complicate their relationships with those around them. In this regard, researchers found that, following the rape, victims tend to experience all relationships and closeness as potentially threatening and dangerous and that they fear becoming close to others due to mistrust, ambivalence and feelings of betrayal (Herman, 1992). As a result of these fears and ambivalence, they

often use ineffective ways of obtaining nurturance and support. Furthermore, as mentioned above significant others may respond in inadequate, damaging and hurtful ways which the victim may experience as betrayal, confirming her concerns and fears that relationships are dangerous and threatening and contributing to her further withdrawal from those around her (Barnes, 1995; Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998; Mills & Turnbull, 2004). It is furthermore likely that other symptoms, such as anxiety attacks, hypervigilance and depression, may limit the victims' motivation for socialisation.

On the other hand, the partner's overprotectiveness of the victim may bring about a situation where he continuously shields the victim from contact with family, friends and colleagues which he perceives as having the potential to upset the victim. In addition, like victims, partners' exhaustion, concerns with safety and depressive symptoms may also limit their willingness and desire to socialise. The combined impact of the above behaviours of the victim and partner may be that the couple not only becomes isolated and disconnected from one another, but also from their support network. Another possibility, according to researchers, is that couples may choose to not disclose the occurrence of the rape to their families, friends and colleagues (Feinauer, 1982). According to these researchers, keeping the rape a secret not only disconnects couples from their social networks, but also significantly limits the support, care and assistance available to these couples.

2.4 CONCLUSION

The impact of rape on the victim and her partner has been researched for many years. When researchers and clinicians became aware of the interpersonal and relational effects of rape, attempts were made to extend what was known in respect of individual partners to their relationship. It was increasingly recognised that applying an individual approach or lens to these relationships was not effective, and did not provide an adequate framework or model against which research findings could be understood. Various researchers and clinicians suggested that future research should look towards systemic theories and family therapy as possible approaches to explore and understand the interpersonal and relational impact of rape (Barnes, 1995; Connop & Petrak, 2004; Mills & Turnbull, 2001; Remer & Ferguson, 1995).

This study consequently adopts a systemic approach in an attempt to explore and understand the systemic and relational dynamics and meaning-making processes of couples in the context of stranger rape, as well as the unique dilemmas faced by these couples. The following chapter provides an overview of the most pertinent aspects of family systems theory and of how these aspects relate to the phenomenon under investigation.

CHAPTER 3

A SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK

3.1 GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Family systems theory was influenced to a large degree by the ideas and concepts of general systems theory, of which Ludwig von Bertalanffy is regarded as the "father". At the time, in the field of science, it was recognised that both biological and non-biological phenomena shared systems attributes. According to Von Bertalanffy (1968), a system can be defined as a group of elements that are interrelated by a dynamic interchange of energy, information or materials into a product of the outcome, for use within or outside (in the environment) the system. Similarly, Gregory Bateson defined a system as "...any unit containing feedback structure and therefore competent to process information" (Bateson, 1971, p. 243). From the above it is possible to see that the most notable characteristics of a system are the processing of information, the patterned interactions of system components and the non-linearity or circularity of those interactions as they feed back into the system and into the environment.

These ideas opposed the predominant scientific ideas of the time and Von Bertalanffy (1968) criticised scientific inquiry of the day as being reductionistic. At that time, scientific inquiry focused on the isolation of phenomena into simpler units, with analysis as the principal method of understanding (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Von Bertalanffy argued that in order to understand phenomena, attention had to be given not only to individual elements, but also to the interrelationships between elements. He furthermore suggested that the focus of understanding should fall on system processes, with general systems theory providing the functional and structural rules considered applicable for the description of all systems.

General systems theory introduced new and different ideas which could be applied to various contexts and as a result came to be regarded as a meta-theory, or theory of theories. This means that it came to be viewed as a set of interdisciplinary principles and models applicable to systems in general, regardless of the nature of elements or systems involved. These principles and models can be applied to any field, including biology, engineering, sociology and psychology.

3.2 FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Family systems theory developed through the work of various prominent researchers and therapists, in a diverse range of fields, who practiced joined treatment of couples and families. Key to the development of the theory, however, was Gregory Bateson and the formation of the Palo Alto Group.

This group initially focused on communication patterns in families and thereby marked the beginning of a shift, from content to pattern and process, in the treatment of families. The focus turned to the family system as a whole and patterns observed in the family and between its members, rather than concentrating on the intrapsychic workings or dynamics of respective individual members (Gurman & Kniskern, 1991).

However, in adopting this new approach, it was realised that the psychoanalytic language which was predominantly used at the time would no longer suffice as it could not explain the observed inter-individual patterns, reciprocal influence and recursion in relationships. Therapists and researchers began developing a new language and found in general systems theory a useful way to express their new thinking about families as supra-individual phenomena (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Gurman & Kniskern, 1991).

The above changes regarding the way in which individuals and families were viewed heralded a paradigm shift in the field of psychology. This set the stage for viewing and understanding individuals and individual problems in the context of relationships and relationship issues between individuals, rather than in isolation. These changes also mean that researchers and clinicians, working from a systemic perspective, focus on the **what** and **how** of phenomena, and not on **why** things happen the way they do (Hoffman, 1981). Thus, the focus falls on the here-and-now dynamics and experiences of events, as well as on patterns in relationships (Searight & Openlander, 1987; Tomm, 1984). According to Becvar and Becvar (2003), adopting a systemic perspective also means focusing on questions that can describe the here-and-now dynamics of experiences and phenomena, for example: "Who are the system members?"; "What rules and roles constitute the boundaries of the system and how open, closed, flexible or rigid are these boundaries and rules?"; "What are the characteristic interactional patterns?" and "How does the system balance its tendencies toward stability and towards change?". Asking these kinds of questions directs the researcher's attention towards the relational and interactional levels of systems, rather than towards the individual level.

In addition to the above and throughout recent years, the family therapy field has also evolved, to include not only an emphasis on the abovementioned patterns, processes and sequences, but also increasingly beginning to emphasise meaning, the centrality of language and the joined construction of understanding between system members as patterns in themselves (Dallos & Stedmon, 2006). Essentially all patterns and regularities are understood to be created through language and in turn, this creation is seen as a pattern or process in itself. Consequently, from a family systems perspective, families and relationships are not only cybernetic systems, but also systems of meaning and therefore

not only interactive, but interpretative as well (Hoffman, 1992). A systemic researcher will therefore also be curious about the system's meaning-making processes and patterns, and how meaning is co-constructed between system members and attributed to events within and outside the system. The meanings constructed by systems and their members give the systemic researcher much information regarding the dynamics within systems.

3.3 FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AND STRANGER RAPE

As was seen in the previous chapter, stranger rape clearly impacts on the couple's relationship. Although some attempts were made to understand the relational impact of rape, previous research remained focused on the individual and individual processes (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993; Bateman & Mendelson, 1989; Flischer & Isaacs, 1995; Gore-Felton et al., 1999). Furthermore, these attempts predominantly adopted a linear understanding, in other words perceiving rape as "causing" relational difficulties for the couple. Understanding the impact of rape was furthermore limited to understanding the rape-trauma process in isolation, in other words how individual partners' trauma syndromes following the rape impacted on one another, and to helping the couple integrate and deal with the rape by focusing on the combination of their individual trauma processes and on their individual responses to the rape (Remer & Ferguson, 1995; Van den Berg & Pretorius, 2000). Although these attempts were more relational in approach and definitely valuable, they were still reductionistic, in that they ignored the larger relational context within which both individuals' trauma syndromes and the couple's trauma process were situated. By limiting their focus to understanding and explaining these processes in isolation, earlier researchers effectively cut these systems to pieces. In this way, the prominence of rape, its "hide and divide" nature and its triangulation into the couple's relationship were maintained or perpetuated.

This study suggests that using a systemic perspective, to explore and understand the impact of stranger rape on a couple's relationship, enables the researcher to view the rape victim, her partner and their trauma processes in the larger context of their relationship system (couple system) with its dynamics, as well as viewing the said system in the larger context of the family system and its dynamics. Thus, a systemic perspective enables the researcher to view the rape-trauma process as a process or pattern that is superimposed on the couple system with its own pre-existing processes, patterns and rules which will not only be affected by the rape-trauma process, but will also impact on this process. Furthermore, adopting a systemic perspective affords the researcher the opportunity to understand all behaviour within the system as logically coherent with and fitting within the system, in keeping with the systemic principle of structure determinism (Maturana, 1975). Thus, the system does what it does, so that it can

do what it does (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). This view enables the researcher to move away from a pathologising view of couples' responses to stranger rape and rather focus on how these couples adjust to, make sense of and find meaning in the rape in a way that fit with, or is effective or functional for them. Only by taking the broader system context into consideration, in other words the couple system together with how this system is situated in the larger family and social context, and by exploring and attempting to understand this context, can the rape-trauma process and the couple's relationship and system be better understood. This more encompassing understanding hopefully paves the way for implementing the suggestion made years ago, namely that couples' relationships be viewed and utilised as "contexts of healing" (Miller & Sutherland, 1999).

The following core ideas are especially relevant for understanding and exploring relational and system dynamics and may therefore be useful for understanding the processes, patterns and rules at play in couples dealing with stranger rape. As such these systemic principles provide a useful framework for conceptualising the reciprocal impact between couples' relationships and stranger rape.

3.3.1   Recursion

According to the concept of recursion, or reciprocal causality, people and events are seen and understood in the context of mutual interaction and mutual influence (Bateson, 1979; Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Furthermore, meaning is derived from these mutually constructed relations and interactions between system members, systems and events since each defines the other through their interaction (Tomm, 1984). Therefore meaning is always context- and relationship-specific. Rather than thinking in terms of linear causality, in other words one event causing another event, this concept implies that we affect, and are also significantly affected, by other people or that any occurrence, behaviour or event can be both cause and effect of other occurrences, behaviours or events. Thus, people, their behaviours and events are seen as forming part of a larger recursive dance (Hoffman, 1981).

In the context of this study, this approach therefore means that stranger rape cannot be understood as an event that linearly impacts on the couple and family systems with certain circumscribed consequences or effects. Previous research has already acknowledged the mutual influence and recursion inherent in the victim and her partner's rape-trauma syndromes in the aftermath of the attack (Remer & Ferguson, 1995; Van den Berg & Pretorius, 2000). However as mentioned, these aspects were viewed in isolation and not as part of their larger relational contexts. Such a punctuation ignores the recursion inherent in systems, between system processes, as well as between events and systems. Thus, viewing stranger rape through a systemic lens, the researcher is interested in placing the trauma process in the couple's larger relational context. By focusing on **what** and **how** questions, and on the here-and-now dynamics,

patterns and behaviour sequences of the couple system, the researcher aims to explore and understand the reciprocal impact and influence between the rape and subsystem and system processes.

In the context of this study, the mutual influence between the couple subsystem, as the executive system of the nuclear family, and other subsystems such as the sibling and parental subsystems are especially relevant. Furthermore, the way(s) in which the larger family system (extended family) responds or does not respond to the rape, will also provide valuable insight in terms of larger pre-existing systemic processes, patterns and rules and how these may play out within and impact on the couple subsystem. In this regard the degree of support, involvement, closeness and connectedness between subsystems within the nuclear family, and between the nuclear family and the larger family system, are especially relevant.

3.3.2   Feedback processes

Feedback refers to the process whereby information about a system's past behaviours (or output) is fed back into the system in circular patterns, affecting the input of the system (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Penn, 1982). In other words, feedback contains responses to our own and others' behaviours and also provides us with information about these behaviours. Feedback processes furthermore serve to regulate the system by evaluating, monitoring and adjusting for stability, fluctuations and new information. Therefore, feedback can be thought of as the self-corrective mechanisms of systems.

Two varieties of feedback can be distinguished. Firstly, negative feedback, or deviation-correcting feedback, serves to maintain stability or homeostasis within a system and operates by keeping deviation in the system within certain parameters (Hoffman, 1981; Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Thus, adjustments are made for a perceived change in the system in a way that maintains the status quo or homeostasis of the system. On the other hand, positive or deviation-amplifying feedback refers to those processes which acknowledge the occurrence of a change within the system and show that this change was accepted by the system (Hoffman, 1981; Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Therefore, positive feedback resets the parameters, rules, structure or any other value, pattern or norm of the system, allowing more variation within the system and thereby increasing the system's adaptability, creativity, growth and organisation. When the variable that was initially adjusted for reaches its parameters, the system settles back into a temporary homeostasis or balance. Finally, in order to ensure survival, any system constantly has to balance its tendencies towards stability and towards change, which results in a dynamic equilibrium between these processes (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Gurman & Kniskern, 1991).

Feedback processes are an integral part of family systems theory. Family systems, stress, problems, conflict and growth are partly understood by taking into account the way(s) in which the system's

feedback processes maintain stability or allow change and are therefore also an indication of the system's rigidity or flexibility (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). In the context of stranger rape, awareness and understanding of feedback processes are paramount. If the rape is understood as new information that needs to be adjusted for and processed by the system, one can expect that this new information may disturb the delicate balance between the system's tendencies towards stability and towards change. The rape may in fact push the system into a crisis, by destabilising many of the formerly stable patterns and processes at a time when stability is required or by reducing variety and change, thereby making the system more rigid at a time when flexibility is required.

Generally a system initially responds to instability and stress by attempting to re-establish the previous balance, in other words through negative feedback processes (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Von Bertalanffy, 1972). In the context of stranger rape, this can be achieved in various ways, such as the victim's non-disclosure of or withholding important information about the rape, disclosure and subsequent denial and refusal by the couple or larger family system to discuss the rape, or attempts to return to usual routines, roles and responsibilities while ignoring problems posed by trauma symptoms, such as anxiety, flashbacks, dissociation or physical injuries, which may complicate return to the former status quo. Depending on the couple and family contexts, these adaptations may be effective and may temporarily return the system to its previous level of stability and functioning. These are examples of negative feedback processes operating within the couple and family system. In previous research such responses were often regarded as pathological and undesirable (Mills & Turnbull, 2004). However, viewed from a systemic perspective, these responses can be understood as temporary self- or system-preservation strategies in order to ensure system survival in the post-rape context.

On the other hand, depending on the system, it is also possible that these adjustments and preservation strategies not only fail to restabilise the system, but that information about these adjustments and strategies may, in addition to the information introduced by the rape, reverberate throughout the system. This may contribute to the escalation of the system's instability, thereby increasing the threat to its survival. In addition, it is important to consider that this new information may or may not resonate with pre-rape system dynamics, such as unstable relationship definitions, ineffective communication patterns, or other information (for example previous traumas) within the system, which may furthermore add to the volatility of the latter. This may manifest in the creation or escalation of conflict between the victim and partner, or between the couple and other systems, enmeshment (over-involvement) or disengagement (cut-off) between individuals and systems. Furthermore, the instability in relationship definitions and the prevalence of communication problems such as double bind, paradoxical or incongruent messages may also increase. System instability may escalate to a point

where the rules, patterns, norms and values of the system are adjusted or transformed in order to accommodate the new circumstances. These are examples of positive feedback processes and imply changes in how the couple, family and system members communicate, in roles, responsibilities and boundaries, and in how they co-create meaning to ensure stability and survival of the system.

Although positive and negative feedback cycles are described separately above, it is expected that a system will, in all likelihood, respond to the instability and stress introduced by stranger rape with a combination of positive and negative feedback cycles.

3.3.3   Morphostasis and morphogenesis

Closely linked to the above feedback processes and dynamic equilibrium between stability and change are the systemic concepts of morphostasis and morphogenesis. Morphostasis describes a system's ability or potential to remain stable in a context of change. As seen above, this is achieved through negative feedback processes. Morphogenesis, on the other hand, describes system-enhancing behaviour which allows for growth, creativity and change of its structure as part of the process to maintain the system's stability and functionality (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Penn, 1982). These changes are achieved through positive feedback cycles (Hoffman, 1981). A balance between morphostasis and morphogenesis is necessary for a system to remain functional; in other words, system rules will allow for a change in the rules when such a change is in order or required, and will resist a change at times when it is inappropriate or threatens the system.

From the above it is clear that morphostasis and morphogenesis refer to the level of system rules and to change and stability in those rules. For example, any family moving through the family life cycle, at some point, needs rule changes as its members change and develop. These developmental stages are anticipated and appropriate changes are made and incorporated into the system, such as allowing a teenager to stay out later at night compared to when the same child was seven years old. These changes are reflective of adjustments in the context of stability – rules are modified while the family's level of functioning is maintained and therefore offer an example of a balance between morphogenesis and morphostasis. However, if the same family predominantly emphasises morphostasis over morphogenesis by sticking to outdated rules, or predominantly emphasises morphogenesis by permitting too many or too frequent rule changes, the previously established stable degree of family functioning will be threatened.

According to Walsh (1993), the way in which a couple or family responds as a functional unit to a critical or stressful event is as important as the event itself. Stressful events can be both external and

internal to the system. However, non-normative, uncommon, unexpected or traumatic stressors, such as exposure to crime or natural disasters, present the system with unusual changes in the external context as well as in its internal context. New information and changes are rapidly introduced into the way the system and its members perceive the environment, their system and its processes, as well as into members' beliefs. Not only do system members have to deal with this new information and changes, but they also often have to deal with the disruption of their normal life routine in unwanted ways (Figley, 1989). Thus, the manner in which members and systems interact is changed unexpectedly. In the context of a stressful event such as stranger rape, the couple and family systems' balance between morphostasis and morphogenesis becomes a highly complicated juggling act. Enough closedness, stability and rigidity of rules are required to protect the identity of the couple and family system, ensure its survival and re-establish homeostasis in the post-rape context. Yet, enough openness, flexibility and rule changes are also required in order to ensure access to support and appropriate incorporation of the new information into the system in a way that maintains its functionality. Should the system not be able to find an appropriate balance, it is likely that it will not be able to survive.

3.3.4   Patterns, rules and boundaries

People tend to develop habitual ways of communicating, behaving and relating to one another referred to as redundant patterns of interaction. These patterns provide stability in interactions, which are otherwise characterised by continuous changes over time (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fish, 1974). Thus, patterns are interactional stabilities in the context of continuous change and therefore patterns are often taken to represent the rules of the system. System rules, in turn, express the values of the system as well as the roles appropriate to behaviour within the system and also provide an indication of the system's organisational structure (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Rules are mostly implicit or covert and exist outside the conscious awareness of system members. Systems theory furthermore states that a system exists only in the eye of the beholder and therefore the behavioural patterns, rules and boundaries exist only in so far as the observer (or researcher) chooses to define the system and its boundaries or rules (Keeney, 1982; Von Foerster, 1981).

Based on the abovementioned habitual and redundant patterns of interaction and the covert and overt rules which develop between individuals and between and within systems, one can expect that the way people interact, define their interactions and deal with, discuss, argue and solve problems and issues will mostly be the same, regardless of the content (Watzlawick et al., 1974). This is reflected in the systemic concepts of equifinality and equipotentiality (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Thus, patterns and rules are not only created through interactions, but also describe and define the interactional how, when

and to whom between individuals and systems in a specific context of time and place. Systems theory describes these patterns and rules in terms of concepts that define the nature of these relationships and interactions, such as closeness and distance, enmeshment and disengagement, connectedness and disconnectedness, isolation, mutual support, mutual nurturing, belonging and separateness and accommodation and negotiation (Andolfi, 1983; Auerswald, 1985; Minuchin, 1974).

Furthermore, a system's rules distinguish it from other systems and therefore also form the boundaries of the system. These boundaries are not visible and can only be inferred from the system's structure and organisation, as well as from repeated behavioural patterns within and between systems and individuals. Thus, boundaries in themselves are interactional patterns which differentiate members of one system from those of another (Bross & Papp, 1982). In terms of families, three subsystems have been identified, namely the marital (or couple), parental and sibling subsystems, each with its respective boundaries and rules (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). The marital or couple subsystem is partly the product of what the individual partners bring to the relationship in terms of their personal development. This includes the family of origin's beliefs, patterns and rules which have been carried forward and general life experiences. In addition mate-selection processes, co-operation, accommodation and negotiation, yielding part of one's separateness in order to belong to the relationship, the ability to be close and intimate and to be apart, and the co-construction of a new relational reality during the formation and maintenance of the relationship, are equally important (Efran, Lukens & Lukens, 1990). The parental and sibling subsystems come into existence with the birth of the first child. The parental subsystem requires renewed accommodation, negotiation and role allocation between the partners, accessibility of both parents to the children, nurturance of the children, use of authority, guidance and control in raising the children, as well as accommodation and negotiation of the developmental stages of the children, parents and family. Lastly, the sibling subsystem is the place where children learn to co-operate, negotiate and compete and should therefore also be protected from over-involvement by the parental subsystem (Becvar & Becvar, 2003).

From the above it is clear that boundaries mark the shape of the family system and its subsystems and can be understood as invisible "lines" demarcating the system and delineating who is part of the system and who is not. As mentioned above, boundaries are not fixed states, but are dynamic interactional patterns responsible for monitoring and controlling internal systemic comfort with internal and external feedback and interaction (Nichols & Everett, 1986). The boundaries between systems and subsystems, and between systems and their external environment, differ in nature, can be evaluated in terms of their relative permeability and are described as clear, rigid or diffuse (Becvar & Becvar, 2003).

Clear boundaries are the ideal and are firm, yet permeable. The permeability of clear boundaries implies appropriate access across subsystems and systems and allows for the negotiation of developmental, expected and unexpected changes in the family system (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). This also implies an appropriate balance between mutual nurturance, support, taking of responsibility and making allowances for an appropriate amount of autonomy amongst system members and subsystems. Clear boundaries furthermore allow for the protection of the system and subsystems, as these boundaries move toward rigidity and decreased permeability in times of internal or external crises, but relax when the threat has passed, ensuring, once again, appropriate openness and movement of members and information across subsystems and between the system and the environment (Minuchin, 1974).

On the other hand, rigid boundaries imply disengagement between and within systems, which means that family members are isolated from one another, subsystems within the family are rigidly segregated and the family system as a whole is isolated from other systems, such as the extended family or community system. This is not necessarily regarded as pathological and may be an indication of the family's unique way of functioning as relatively autonomous and segregated (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). However, if taken to the extreme it may become problematic for the family. In families where rigid boundaries and disengagement are problematic, access and interaction across subsystems and between the system and the environment are severely restricted and the family system lacks cohesion and adaptability (Minuchin, 1974). In these families, family support and unity often only occur in the face of an extreme crisis.

Diffuse boundaries, in turn, can be regarded as the opposite of rigid boundaries in many ways. Enmeshed relationships are characteristic of diffuse boundaries. Also, in contrast to rigid boundaries where autonomy is prominent, systems with diffuse boundaries are characterised by over-involvement, with all members constantly involved in one another's business (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). As a result, there is a loss of autonomy, limited differentiation and inappropriate dependence, which makes the system vulnerable to both external influences and internal tension (Minuchin, 1974). For example, in such a system the couple subsystem may be almost subsumed by the parental subsystem if the parents spend too much time with the children, devoting all their resources to, and constantly involving themselves in, the sibling subsystem. This over-involvement comes at the cost of the couple and sibling subsystem's needed autonomy. Diffuse boundaries thus reflect poor organisation, or sometimes under-organisation on the part of the family system (Nichols & Everett, 1986). Over-involvement and enmeshed relationships furthermore impair members' abilities to differentiate from the family, thereby

complicating the movement of the family through the family life cycle, where appropriate differentiation is considered a norm of healthy development (Fishbane, 2001).

In the context of stranger rape, one can expect that the manner in which the couple, and also the family, deal with the trauma will reflect some of their redundant interactional patterns or usual ways of interacting, communicating and relating. However, the process of adjusting to the rape becomes much more complicated when one considers that the rape is not the only information with which the system must deal following the attack. Given the engulfing and traumatising nature of stranger rape and the resultant ensuing crisis, it will have implications for the systems' structures. In this regard, in order for the couple and family to remain functional, changes to their structures may be required, which may include changes to their boundaries, rules, patterns and roles (Minuchin, 1974). Boundaries may become more rigid in attempts to protect the system and system members, or more diffuse in order to access support. Either way, the function of these changes will be to ensure the survival of the systems involved. Thus, although the couple and family may attempt to deal with the rape according to established processes, patterns and rules, boundary changes may provide feedback that immobilises or complicates the use of such processes, patterns and rules, rendering them less effective in the post-rape context. Another possibility is that the couple or family may fall back onto these pre-existing processes, patterns, rules, boundaries and division of roles within the system, regardless of the fact that a different arrangement is required in the post-rape context, thereby also limiting their systems' options for adjustment.

Thus, in the post-rape context the flexibility and adaptability of interactional processes, patterns and rules, and the permeability of boundaries, will be of paramount importance. From a systemic perspective, it is expected that if there is an inappropriate increase in impermeability, rigidity or enmeshment of boundaries and an increase in the predictability of interactional processes, patterns and rules, the variety and alternatives for the couple and family are reduced. These systems may then become stuck in highly predictable and repeated interactional sequences around the crisis introduced by the rape (Bross & Papp, 1982).

In this regard, researchers found that rape-trauma often brings to the fore, or exacerbates, issues concerning closeness-distance regulation in the physical, emotional, and social aspects of the couple's relationship (Barnes, 1995; Connop & Petrak, 2004; Miller et al., 1982; Mills & Turnbull, 2004). Relational patterns of closeness and connectedness are complicated and multi-dimensional. In this regard, the way in which and about what couples communicate, what they share and do not share with one another, how they understand one another, how they support, nurture and care for each other, how

they deal with conflict and how they interact on a physical level all give an indication of the relative connectedness and closeness of partners in a relationship (Pistole, 1994).

Pistole (1994) furthermore argued that difficulty with closeness-distance regulation is a central source of controversy in all couples' relationships, and struggles in this regard are often a major theme in relationship distress. A common pattern found amongst couples is that one partner at some point in time requires greater involvement, intimacy or closeness, whereas the other partner requires disengagement, separateness, distance or space. This forms part of the normal ebb and flow in couple systems; in a flexible relationship, the partners are able to alternate between these positions, depending on their needs, available system resources and the requirements of the context. Thus, partners, as part of their relationship functioning and definition, have to negotiate or regulate a level of closeness or distance which is comfortable for both. Once a mutually desirable closeness-distance level is reached, it will function as part of the couple system's parameters, rules and boundaries, and their relationship will be stable in this regard.

However, when the couple comes under threat, for example through the trauma of stranger rape, this may mean substantial alterations in permeability of boundaries and the regulation of closeness and distance within their system and between the couple system and other systems. Within the couple system, the previously negotiated, settled and comfortable closeness-distance parameters between partners may become unstable. One or both partners may manoeuvre for a change by becoming more involved than the norm (rule) for their relationship. Alternatively, the change may also move in the opposite direction with partners manoeuvring for increased distance and space. The closeness-distance struggle always involves strong emotion; however, in the context of trauma, trauma-related emotions add to the emotional ladenness of the struggle. The more severe the threat introduced by the trauma, the higher the possibility of distress in the couple (Nelson, et al., 2002). The more distressed the couple, the more they will manoeuvre to change the parameters in terms of closeness-distance regulation and the more susceptible their interaction becomes to highly predictable sequences of behaviour. According to Nelson et al. (2002) distressed couples often seem to adopt mutually exclusive positions in a pursuer-distancer pattern, where one partner approaches and pursues, whereas the other partner consistently distances or moves away. However, the partners can also switch stances, where the distancer suddenly manoeuvres for closeness and the pursuer then adopts the opposite stance and distances himself or herself from the partner (Pistole, 1994). Thus, the couple's interactions become limited to moves related to closeness and distance.

Based on the above research it can be hypothesised that, in the context of stranger rape, the couple's closeness-distance regulation may be disturbed by the emergence of a pursuer-distancer pattern where the male partner continuously manoeuvres for closeness by behaving in a caring and nurturing way, attempting to hold the victim, comfort her and to discuss the rape in order to help both the victim and himself deal with the trauma. The victim may distance herself from his attempts at closeness, owing to her own concerns about protecting him, protecting herself, or losing him should he know the full details of what has happened, realise the intensity of her emotions or owing to feelings of self-blame, guilt or shame. When the victim then finally decides to allow the closeness and reciprocate with her own manoeuvres for closeness by discussing the rape or showing how upset she is, the partner may find himself overwhelmed and may then manoeuvre for distance by becoming very involved at work, thereby limiting recreational time spent with the victim and minimising the opportunity for discussion of the rape. The victim may respond by again distancing herself, about which the partner may in turn feel guilty and respond with renewed manoeuvres for closeness.

In the above scenario it seems that, despite the couple's distress, they are somehow attempting to maintain the previously negotiated level of closeness and distance with which they have felt more comfortable. However, it may also be the case that this previously negotiated level of closeness is now inappropriate for individual and system requirements in the post-rape context. Thus, the changed context, different needs, abovementioned manoeuvres and the emergence of a pursuer-distancer pattern represent a difference from their previous relational patterns in terms of closeness and distance. It is also likely that this difference will bring about even more distress, because the couple is not only regulating and re-negotiating closeness and distance, but also re-negotiating their respective individual boundaries, subsystem boundaries, relationship rules and definitions at a time when the system's balance has been disturbed. Furthermore, the oscillation between the different positions can add to the post-rape instability, confusion and distress in the system.

Another pattern often identified in, but not exclusive or limited to, traumatised couples relates to polarised emotional roles (Nelson et al., 2002). According to these researchers this pattern is evident when the interaction between partners is marked by one partner behaving in a highly emotional and reactive fashion, whereas the other partner's emotional reaction is overly controlled and restricted. In systemic terms these polarised emotional roles appear to regulate and balance affective expression in the couple system, thereby bringing about stability in the system. In the aftermath of trauma this pattern may be especially instrumental in containing emotional and symptom expression within the couple system. In a flexible relationship, partners may fluctuate between the opposite poles depending on the issue at hand, the triggering event or the context. However, in the post-trauma context the pattern may

also become extreme, fixed and rigid, displaying a potential for the development of fixed positions or functions in the relationship, with one partner being typecast as the "emotional one" and the other as the "cold one". In this way, systemic processes are translated into individual symptoms, minimising other options for affective regulation and other positions or roles in the couple's relationship.

In the aftermath of rape, the couple's patterns and rules as regards give and take in terms of mutual support and nurturing may also change. Researchers have found that although partners are able and willing to support victims for a certain period of time, they are not able to do so indefinitely (Chauncey, 1994; Cohen, 1988). Similarly, other researchers also found that partners often require increased levels of support at a time when they are expected to give support (Smith, 2005). From a systemic perspective this can be understood as a disturbance of the balance and reciprocity between giving and taking care, providing and receiving support and nurturance, and the allocation of responsibility in the relationship. This may also have implications for the couple's relationship definition and their respective roles.

Issues regarding disengagement, enmeshment, closeness and distance are not only likely to play out within the couple system, but also within the larger family system. For example, in the context of perceived threat, anxiety and fear, the parental subsystem may become over-involved or enmeshed with the sibling subsystem in order to protect the children. Similarly, the extended family system may become enmeshed with the couple and nuclear family systems through their attempts to provide assistance in the aftermath of the rape. Another possibility is that the parental subsystem may disengage, or become completely cut off, from the sibling subsystem in an effort to protect the children. The larger family system may, for example, be unsupportive due to misconceptions about rape and rape myths, and may disengage from the couple. This leaves the couple disconnected at a time when they need to be supported. All these responses will not only reflect the couple and family's response to the rape, but may also reflect larger pre-existing system dynamics, especially in terms of levels of involvement, disengagement, or differentiation as well as family secrets and myths. Thus, these dynamics will recursively impact the way in which the couple and larger family systems respond to and deal with the rape and its impact.

In contrast to all of the above, stranger rape can also be an unexpected and distressing event to which the couple system responds with more appropriate boundary permeability and clarity, unhinging the system from previously predictable sequences of interaction and stuckness. This will increase the organisation, flexibility, variety and growth within the couple system. In a context where the rape sets in motion positive feedback loops which enable the couple system to evolve to more appropriate, creative and flexible functioning, these changes may provide information about past functioning which

the partners and other system members will also have to deal with. Although this information can be threatening to the couple's new way of functioning, it is to be expected that, given their higher level of functioning and more appropriate flexibility and organisation, the couple will be able to integrate this information in a functional way by using their awareness of past functioning to bolster and maintain new patterns.

3.3.5   Openness and closedness

The extent to which a system permits or prohibits the input of new information, determines its openness and closedness. A closed system is one where interactions occur mainly among the system components and not with the environment. On the other hand, an open system is one that either receives input from the environment or releases output to the environment, or both (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). As feedback processes deal with the way new information or lack of new information is processed within a system, and boundaries deal with the accessibility or permeability of systems, they are also closely linked to the degree to which a system is open or closed.

All living systems, for example families, are open to some extent and therefore openness and closedness is a matter of degree and can only be evaluated within a specific context (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Dell, cited in Hoffman, 1981). The openness of living systems refers to the fact that they are in continual interaction with their environment. The above writers further stated that an appropriate balance between openness and closedness is required for system survival. In terms of the above discussion on boundaries, such a balance would imply boundary flexibility to enable the system to move on a continuum from more closed to more open, depending on the context. If the system is too open, or if the input into the system is too different from the system's values, this may threaten the identity and also the survival of the system. Similarly, when input is denied at a time when it is required, or when there is too little input into the system, its identity and survival may also be threatened.

In the context of this study, the occurrence of stranger rape can be understood as information entering the couple system and all systems related to and in interaction with this system. In this regard, the rape may bring previously unknown or unconsidered information about the couple's external environment into their system, for example that the couple's house or neighbourhood, or even the world, is not safe and cannot be controlled. Furthermore, the rape is also likely to represent information that is in conflict with the couple and family's worldview, for example the couple and family may have held a worldview that negative events only happen to bad people; they may subscribe to certain rape myths such as that rape only happens to irresponsible women, or that women somehow provoke rape; that they as

individuals or their family are invulnerable; or that one can protect oneself in any situation (Fetchenhauer, Jacobs & Belschak, 2005). This difference in information represented by the rape, when compared to the system's norms, values and worldview, may threaten the couple and family system's identity and survival.

From a systemic perspective, the researcher is concerned with the impact of this information on the couple and their family and with how they deal with this information and accompanying threat to their system's survival. In this regard the concepts of closedness and openness may be especially useful. The couple subsystem and their nuclear family may respond to the rape, and the information it brings into their system, by predominantly maintaining closed boundaries. This may manifest in non-disclosure, that is, keeping the rape secret from anyone outside of the nuclear family or couple subsystem, socially isolating themselves, or in a refusal to seek professional attention or assistance when it is needed. On the one hand these can possibly be understood as protective strategies by the couple to limit additional potentially damaging information, such as prejudice towards, or labelling of, the victim or the couple and unwanted questions or attention, coming into their system at a time when the system is already destabilised and flooded with new information. On the other hand, these strategies may also be based on misconceptions, shame and acceptance of rape myths, in which instance closed boundaries will serve to perpetuate such misconceptions and myths, since information to the contrary cannot enter the system. In other words, systemically, closed boundaries may have the function of protecting the system against additional threats and destabilising information. However, they may also cut the couple off from possible sources of support, such as family, friends, crisis centres or therapy. Closed boundaries limit the influx of potentially new and helpful information into the system at a time when it is needed, such as what to expect following the rape, medical information, information on how partners can support one another, how they can deal with the impact of the rape on their relationship and family, exposure of rape myths, as well as hindering information which may assist the couple in normalising the trauma and integrating the rape into their worldview. Such helpful information may assist the couple in restabilising their system and returning to former levels of functionality or creating new ones.

In contrast to the above, in the aftermath of stranger rape, the couple system may also move towards the other extreme side of the openness-closedness continuum, by being too open and allowing too much information into the system. For example, the couple may indiscriminately talk about their ordeal or about relational problems following the rape to anyone who will listen, which may mean that they are more vulnerable to prejudiced or unhelpful input by family and friends. They may allow over-involvement of other individuals and systems in relational issues or conflict between the partners, or with the parental subsystem, on an indefinite basis. Another possibility is that they may approach

professionals for assistance and indiscriminately adopt the viewpoints of these experts, regardless of whether or not these viewpoints are congruent with their system's values and viewpoints. As with being too closed, being too open can also be understood as part of the system's unique way of attempting to protect itself. However, once again the impact of these strategies, depending on the system, may be quite different. Too much information and too many people becoming involved in the couple's relationship and in their nuclear family system, may add to or maintain, rather than reduce, the instability and chaos in their system, may perpetuate the presence of the rape in the couple system and may serve as continuous reminders of the rape.

From the above it is clear that the couple system's boundaries may undergo significant changes in terms of openness and closedness in the post-rape context. In addition to how the couple deals with information coming from outside their system, following the rape, the couple also has to deal with information originating from inside their system. As discussed thus far, system and relational dynamics are impacted by rape in a way which requires temporary or longer term adjustments or changes in the reciprocal flow and balance of support and nurturance, relational closeness and distance, roles, responsibilities and rules. All these changes or adjustments essentially mean changes to the couple system's structure and therefore also its identity. This, in turn, may alter the way partners interact with one another and the way the couple interacts with other systems, such as the sibling subsystem or the extended family system. These changes may transform the couple and family systems from contexts of relative safety, to contexts of turmoil, instability, tension and distress. Therefore, the occurrence of the rape may significantly alter partners' views of their systems as safe and protective units. Dealing with this internal information in a system which is too closed or too open may furthermore destabilise the system internally by preventing or complicating the couple's re-negotiation and redefinition of system rules, roles, patterns and processes.

In addition to the above, from a systemic perspective, the above changes to the couple system's openness and closedness should also be viewed in the context of usual (pre-rape) patterns in terms of protecting its identity, openness and closedness and usual interactions with other systems in their external environment. Because the post-rape context is recursively impacted by pre-existing system dynamics, consideration of pre-rape dynamics can be helpful in understanding what happens in the post-rape context in terms of the couple system's openness and closedness.

From the above it should be evident that in the post-rape context an appropriate balance between openness and closedness may be vital for the couple system's survival. In this regard it would seem that the said system's boundaries should be open enough to allow helpful information into the system,

provided that this information is congruent with its values and norms, with members' needs as well as with the requirements of the context. On the other hand, the system's boundaries should be closed enough to ward off information that is too different from its identity or which may amplify instability within the system, regardless of the source of such information.

3.3.6   Relationship definitions, patterns and power

As discussed above, individuals in a system are interdependent and mutually influence one another through their interactions. According to Becvar and Becvar (2003), it is the interaction that provides the context of a relationship. As such, it becomes important to understand how individuals define their relationships. In family systems theory, three main relationship definitions have been identified (Haley, 1963; Hoffman, 1981):

- In relationships defined as complementary, the interactional pattern between partners is characterised by the exchange of high frequencies of opposite kinds of behaviours, such as dominance and submission, closeness and distance, cruelty and kindness, aggressiveness and passivity. When the relationship definition is flexible, partners can alternate between the one-up and one-down positions: in other words although partners will exchange opposite kinds of behaviours, they can alternate in terms of who is dominant or submissive, who tends to come close or remain distant, or who is aggressive or passive. However, when the relationship definition is rigid, partners remain in their respective positions (either one-up or one-down), regardless of the system or context requirements. For example, in these relationships, one partner will mostly be dominant, or take the initiative in terms of closeness whereas the other partner will mostly be submissive, or respond by being distant.

- In relationships defined as symmetrical, the interactional pattern between partners is characterised by the exchange of high frequencies of similar kinds of behaviours: for example withdrawal, criticism, initiating or offering advice by one partner is followed by more withdrawal, criticism, initiating or offering advice by the other. This type of relationship tends to be competitive and the two people involved emphasise their symmetry with one another.

- The third relationship pattern consists of a combination of the above two and is called parallel. In this kind of relationship both complementary and symmetrical behaviours are exchanged. Roles, positions and communication in the relationship are characterised by flexibility and variety and partners alternate between the one-up and one-down positions, depending on system and context requirements. For example, partners are able to respond with complementary behaviours by

alternating between giving advice and receiving advice in one context, while in another context they may respond with more symmetrical behaviours, such as where closeness attempted by one partner is followed by even more closeness from the other partner.

The process of defining a relationship is a normal, ongoing and mostly implicit part of any relationship. Issues of power and control are intertwined with the couple's relationship definition. Essentially, mutually agreeing on and settling their relationship definition as predominantly symmetrical, complementary or parallel also means that the partners have worked out who is in control of what area of their relationship (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). For example, who is responsible for generating an income, for running the household, how to handle disciplining the children, or how nurturance, support and caregiving between the partners are dealt with. Such an agreement will also include if, how and when power is shared or shifted in these areas and also, more generally, how power and control of the relationship definition are decided (Haley, 1963).

Difficult relationships, however, are those where there is disagreement between partners about the types of behaviours that are to take place between them, about who is in control of what area of the relationship, or about how power and control are dealt with, which all reflect an unsettled relationship definition. The partners may then engage in a struggle for control and power of the relationship definition, for power or control in the different areas of their relationship and also for who makes these decisions, which may manifest in open and clear, or subtle and underlying battle, sabotage or passive resistance (Haley, 1963).

Furthermore, given the ongoing nature of the process of defining a relationship, every interaction, behaviour or message between partners constitutes either a confirmation of, or a request or challenge for a different definition. Behaviours, interactions or messages requesting a different definition, or challenging the present definition, make more of an issue of the type of relationship by placing this definition in question. Haley (1963) referred to these as "manoeuvres" and indicated that manoeuvres essentially consist of requests, commands or suggestions that the partner do, say, think or feel something, or alternatively consist of comments on the other person's communicative behaviour.

It is important to note that manoeuvres occur in all relationships and are not an indication of relational problems or difficulties, but rather form part of the normal and ongoing process of finding a workable definition. According to Haley (1963) problems or issues arise when one person attempts to define the relationship, or circumscribe the other person's behaviour (in other words attempts to control the relationship definition or behaviours between the partners) while simultaneously indicating that he or she is not doing that. For example, when a wife requires her husband to be home every night because

she experiences anxiety attacks when she is left alone, he cannot acknowledge that she is controlling what happens between them, because her behaviour is involuntary and *she* does not require him to be home; rather, the anxiety requires his presence at home. The husband finds himself in a peculiar situation where his behaviour, and what is to happen between him and his wife, is controlled by his wife. Yet, at the same time this control is denied.

In the context of this research the above concepts imply that, preceding the rape, couples will display varying degrees of settled or unsettled relationship definitions and patterns, and also varying degrees of flexibility in terms of their relationship definitions. In this regard the rape may significantly impact on and alter the types of behaviours that the partners habitually exchange: for example in a relationship defined as symmetrical before the rape, the couple's exchange of similar kinds of behaviours may now be replaced by the exchange of more complementary behaviours. It may happen that, before the rape, one partner's withdrawal was met with even more withdrawal from the other partner. In the post-rape context, however, their pattern of behaviours may now change to one where withdrawal by the rape victim is met with closeness behaviours by the partner. This change may generalise to all contexts, or may be specific to certain contexts such as their sexual interaction or decision making.

In addition to the above and in keeping with the recursiveness of systems, it is expected that just as traumatisation and subsequent symptomatology in the aftermath of stranger rape may impact the types of behaviours exchanged between partners, the couple's relationship definition may also affect the way the couple deals with the rape and symptomatology. For example, consider two couples both with complementary relationship definitions. One couple's relationship is rigidly defined as complementary, implying that the partners remain in their respective one-up and one-down positions, whereas the other couple's relationship definition is flexible, implying that they can alternate between the one-up and one-down positions. In the post-rape context, at different times, either the victim or partner may require support, advice or nurturance while the other person may be required to satisfy these needs. If the couple's relationship definition is flexible, they may more easily and appropriately shift between the positions of providing or receiving support or advice, or between nurturing and being nurtured. If the couple's relationship definition is rigid, such shifts between positions are likely to be very difficult, which may contribute to a situation where one partner provides all the support, advice and nurturance while not receiving any.

Thus, the above changes in the types of behaviours that partners exchange may destabilise the couple's relationship definition, requiring temporary changes or necessitating a re-negotiated agreement between partners. In this process of re-negotiation partners may manoeuvre to change, or manoeuvre to

maintain, their current relationship definition. On the other hand, the couple's relationship definition may also serve to minimise or intensify the instability brought about by the rape, depending on its mutuality and flexibility. It is to be expected that if the relationship definition was unstable or contentious before the occurrence of the rape, the rape might serve to escalate this instability. However, if the relationship definition was settled, flexible and functional for the couple, it could be expected that they would more appropriately deal with and adjust to system instability and to the requirements and demands the post-rape context makes on their relationship.

3.3.7 Relationship roles and power

Closely intertwined with the couple's relationship definition and issues of power and control, is the allocation of roles within their relationship. The couple's relationship can be described as a fundamentally communal relationship, consisting of mutual expectations by both partners to provide benefits, such as social support, care, nurturance and safety (Turner, 1970). These expectations imply that partners expect they will fulfil certain roles for one another, and also that each person will occupy certain roles, and therefore carry certain responsibilities, in the relationship. Furthermore, these expectations, roles and their allocation eventually form part of the couple's relationship definition (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). In addition, culture and socialisation also play a significant role in individuals' expectations from their intimate relationships, as to what kinds of roles are available in these relationships, how these roles are assigned and whether the relationship is defined as complementary, symmetrical or parallel. For example, in more patriarchal cultures, one would expect to find more complementary relationships, where the male partner is predominantly in the one-up position.

In this regard, traditional roles in families are usually allocated according to positions and traditional functions in those positions such as wife, husband, child, mother, father, provider or caregiver. In addition to these traditional roles, families also tend to allocate various other roles and positions to their respective members including, but not limited to, roles such as encourager, harmoniser, organiser, compromiser, aggressor, blocker, recognition or attention seeker, scapegoat and clown (Turner, 1970). The allocation of these non-traditional roles is not an explicit, overt process, but tends to come about through the family or subsystem's self-organising processes, interactional patterns and shared meaning-making. Furthermore, the relative power inherent in the various roles available in a system will differ, depending on aspects such as the family system, the couple subsystem, their histories and their cultures.

Research has shown that rape often highlights important underlying conflicts, agreements, differences and similarities regarding each partner's view of their respective roles in their relationship, making these aspects more visible than they tend to be in the routine of everyday life (White & Rollins, 1981). In addition to the changes discussed in the previous section, this new emphasis on these aspects can also be thought of as a change in the system. Given the interdependence of parts in systems, the increased awareness of these aspects will impact on the entire system.

In the context of the present research, it is expected that the rape victim and partner's roles in their relationship will influence how the couple deals with and adjusts to the rape. It is also expected that the impact of the rape on the couple's relationship, especially in terms of the types of behaviours that are exchanged between partners, may upset the agreed upon allocation of roles and the distribution of power in these roles (Kiser & Black, 2005). Furthermore, alterations in one partner's role will necessitate modifications in the other partner's roles in order to compensate for and adjust to such changes (Balcom, 1996; Turner, 1970). For example, two of the roles traditionally associated with the female partner are those of primary emotional caregiver or running the household, whereas the male partner's role is that of financial caregiver and provider. The rape victim's ability to continue fulfilling these roles may be seriously compromised by the rape, resultant emotional turmoil and post-traumatic symptoms. This will have implications for the role of the partner and he may have to assume some or all of her responsibilities, in addition to his usual ones (Nelson et al., 2002).

In addition to normative roles in the couple's relationship, various researchers have identified specific roles that may develop in relationships where one or both partners have been exposed to trauma (Connop & Petrak, 2004; Nelson, et al., 2002). For example, in the aftermath of rape, the male partner may be required to take on so many of the victim's responsibilities that he effectively becomes like a parent to the victim. He may have to take over all responsibilities and roles, usually divided between partners. In addition, he has to deal with his own responses to the rape and to these relational and interactional changes. Neither the partner, nor the victim, appears to actively seek out the parent or child role; it rather seems to form part of the system's attempt to re-establish some sense of balance and order in the post-rape context. It may also happen that some of the victim's responsibilities are transferred onto one of the children, thereby drawing the child into the couple subsystem and parentifying the child.

With regards to the parent-child roles and positions mentioned above, Rabin and Nardi (1991) identified an alternative, but similar, distribution of responsibilities in the aftermath of trauma, namely over-functioner and under-functioner roles. They found that over-functioning in the wives of war

veterans may increase under-functioning in the veteran, which in turn necessitates more over-functioning in the wife, thereby setting in motion a self-perpetuating cycle which maintains both roles. According to these writers, under-functioning of the veteran is related to post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, other symptomatology such as depression and anxiety attacks, as well as aggressive outbursts and avoidance. Given the similar range of symptoms in the context of rape-trauma, it is also likely that the under-functioner and over-functioner roles may manifest as a variation on the parent-child roles discussed above.

In similar vein, some researchers identified rescuer and victim roles as also developing in the aftermath of rape (Nelson et al., 2002). They related the rescuer role to the partner's anger towards the perpetrator as well as guilt feelings for not preventing the rape. As a result the partner may take responsibility for the victim in various appropriate and inappropriate ways. For example, the victim may act out, as part of her post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, by using alcohol excessively, which may affect her work attendance and performance. The partner may attempt to help the victim by lying to the employer to explain her absence. In this way he rescues the victim by covering for her and taking on her responsibilities. From a systemic perspective, this may develop into a highly organised self-perpetuating pattern for the couple, where the more the partner rescues the victim, the more she needs to be rescued. To some extent rescuing patterns occasionally occur in all couples; however, if taken to the extreme, these may mean that partners become stuck in victim and rescuer roles as part of the restabilising process in the couple system, thereby maintaining the central position of the rape in their relationship.

Rigidified victim-rescuer roles may also impact the victim's healing process in that they keep the victim in a position where she can deal with the rape and its impact on her relationship in destructive ways. For example, the victim-rescuer dynamic may create a context where the victim behaves in inappropriate ways such as acting out or abusing substances (as already mentioned) or indefinitely abdicating all her role-specific duties in the relationship, while simultaneously denying responsibility for her behaviours. By rescuing the victim, the partner perpetuates and participates in the denial of responsibility. Continuing to deny responsibility also means that neither the victim, nor the couple, deals with and integrates the rape, thereby maintaining not only the prominence of the trauma, but also the victim's inappropriate behaviour.

Although it may seem that the over-functioning, parental or rescuing partner is the partner who is in control, based on the fact that this partner seemingly makes all the decisions, researchers have recognised that the victim, child or under-functioner roles can be equally powerful positions (Connop

& Petrak, 2004; Nelson et al., 2002; Rabin & Nardi, 1991). The power in these apparent "one-down" roles is covert and lies in the fact that the person occupying that role often has her needs met, without the added responsibility of attending to the needs of the partner, thereby disturbing the reciprocal flow in terms of caregiving, support and nurturance. Furthermore, due to this covert power, the victim is also in a position where she makes important decisions in terms of couple functioning and their relationship definition, while at the same time denying that she is doing that. The covert nature of these subtle power dynamics often defies verbal expression and may amplify system and relational instability and confusion in the aftermath of rape.

Thus, systemically speaking, these roles may have to do with more than just emotions or the presence or absence of post-traumatic symptoms. These roles may be a way of regulating the couple's struggle to make use of limited system resources and may also comprise part of how the couple adapts to the changes in, or manoeuvres to change, their relationship definition and therefore also the distribution of power and the allocation of responsibilities and roles. It is important that the couple finds ways of interacting which do not reinforce these covert power dynamics, but rather facilitate the re-establishment of reciprocity in their relationship, or at least establish a relational context where there is increased awareness and acknowledgement of issues related to power, roles and mutual and balanced support, caregiving and nurturing (Cutrona, 1996).

From a systemic perspective, the way in which the abovementioned trauma-related roles manifest in the post-rape context will be reciprocally impacted by pre-trauma roles, functioning and the flexibility of the couple's relationship definition. If the couple's relationship definition is flexible enough, it is likely that they will more effectively negotiate changes in traditional roles and relationship-specific roles, without serious and prolonged disruption or unbalanced changes to the reciprocal flow of resources or power distribution. However, if their relationship definition is rigid, they may not be able to negotiate these changes. This may hamper the partners' abilities to fulfil the expectations and needs they have in the post-rape context, which, in turn, may escalate system instability and individual distress.

In addition, the above trauma-specific roles also bring information about new power and control relations and possibilities into the couple's pre-existing power dynamics, which the couple may not have been aware of or considered before. Furthermore, the traditional understanding attributed to rape as a crime committed mainly by men against women, and the perpetuating impact of rape myths, may have significant implications for the couple's relationship and gender issues about power and position. For example, the victim may become acutely aware of male-female power relations in society in

general, and also in the couple's relationship, and may begin to question the allocation of roles and power and by implication also their relationship definition. For instance, in a rigid, complementary relationship where the victim was previously stuck in the one-down position, the victim role may now afford her a certain amount of power which was not previously available to her. The impact of this may be that the couple transform their relationship pattern and definition to include more flexibility, or alternatively, it may also result in power struggles between the victim and the partner which may amplify system instability in the post-rape context.

It should be noted at this point that researchers have referred to the rape victim as taking the position of the child, under-functioner, or needing to be rescued (Connop & Petrak, 2004; Nelson et al., 2002; Rabin & Nardi, 1991). However, this is not necessarily the reality that every couple, dealing with stranger rape, will create. It may also happen that the rape victim becomes the parent, over-functioner or rescuer. When this occurs, it will probably be reflective of, and a function of, the specific couple's unique functioning, their pre-existing relationship definition and the distribution of power and allocation of roles in their relationship.

3.3.8 Communication and information processing

According to Becvar and Becvar (2003) communication and information processing are central to systemic thinking. According to the above writers, although a discussion may be about a relationship, behaviour, change, boundaries, stability or other systemic concepts, one is essentially discussing the way the system communicates and processes information. Thus, when studying a couple's relational and interactional dynamics in the aftermath of stranger rape, the researcher is essentially studying their communication and information processes.

Systemically speaking, the following three principles are essential to communication and information processing in a relationship (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Watzlawick, et al., 1974):

- Principle 1: one cannot not behave.
- Principle 2: one cannot not communicate.
- Principle 3: the meaning of a given behaviour is not the true meaning of that behaviour, but it is the personal truth for the person giving it that specific meaning.

From principle one it follows that we cannot do nothing. Therefore, even when we say that we are doing nothing, for example, lying down, we are still lying and therefore still doing something and still behaving. Similarly, following principle two: "...all behaviour in the context of others has message value..." (Becvar & Becvar, 2003, p. 70). Thus, it is impossible not to communicate, because even

when we are not saying anything, we are still behaving and therefore sending a message to those around us (Bateson, 1979).

Furthermore, the meaning of a message can only be understood in relation to the context in which it occurred. In this regard, emotion can also be viewed as communication since it conveys message value in the contexts in which it occurs. Some theorists regard emotions not as feelings, separate from our bodies and our thoughts, but as actions or bodily predispositions. The same writers argued that "...emotion doesn't precede or follow action – it is the bodily support that a class of actions, requires" (Efran et al., 1990, p. 158). Bateson (cited in Searight & Openlander, 1987) regarded feelings, emotions and thoughts as specifying patterns of relationship between people. Therefore, emotions may not be as intrapsychic as previously believed, and can also be perceived as context markers for an interpersonal system.

Lastly, the third principle mentioned above refers to the fact that various meanings can be attributed to a specific behaviour or message and that no specific attribution or interpretation will be more "correct" or more "real" than another. Thus, in systemic terms, reality is subjective and we all create our own realities and meanings. According to Becvar and Becvar (2003) the manner in which a person creates his/her reality and attributes meaning is a function of the frame of reference, or set of assumptions, she/he brings to bear on an event, interaction or communication. In the context of the couple's relationship, then, one can expect that both partners, in terms of their respective life histories, life experiences and different genders, may bring to bear somewhat or vastly different interpretative frameworks on their own and one another's behaviour and communication. In addition to these differences, the partners over time co-create a shared reality or interpretative framework with specific agreed-upon meanings attributed to this reality, their interactions and communications.

In addition to the above communication principles, three modes of communication can also be identified (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Firstly, the **verbal or digital mode** refers to the spoken word or report aspect of a message. This aspect is regarded as the least significant in defining how a message will be understood. Secondly, the **non-verbal mode**, which is also referred to as the command aspect of a message, includes tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures and inflection and tells a person how a message is to be understood. This mode can also be referred to as the relationship-defining mode of communication, because it defines the intent of the person who sends the message and his view of the relationship. Lastly, the **context** includes aspects such as other people, the place where and time when the communication takes place. The context further defines or modifies the meaning of the message

(the non-verbal mode) and also defines how the people in the context are to relate to one another and how they understand or interpret one another's communication.

Closely related to the above, Becvar and Becvar (2003) mentioned a further distinction in communication and information processing, namely the content and process levels of communication. The content level refers to the verbal information portion of a message, while the process level refers to the combination of the non-verbal and context information of a message. When these two levels match, it means that the communication between two people is congruent, each person is sending and receiving clear messages, and they know where they stand with one another. When these two levels do not match, the communication is described as incongruent and the person receiving the communication is faced with two conflicting messages. The content or verbal level of the message may be one thing, for example "leave me alone", while the process or non-verbal level of the message communicates something different such as "console me" (e.g., crying). The person receiving the message is placed in a difficult position, and has to choose which message to respond to. Another possibility for the receiver will be to comment on the incongruency contained in the message, which is called meta-communication. This means that the person communicates about the communication. More serious and confusing versions of incongruent communication can be found in the double bind message, where there is an additional injunction that correct discrimination between the two conflicting messages is significant for survival.

According to White and Rollins (1981), patterns and opportunities for open communication comprise some of the most critical resources for the couple and family in the aftermath of stranger rape. However, as was discussed in the previous chapter, researchers reported disruption in the couple's communication pattern following the rape as its most damaging consequence (Emm & McKenry, 1988; Mills & Turnbull, 2004). Looking at these research findings through a systemic lens, it seems that traumatised couples often become stuck in communication traps, in the aftermath of rape. Using the above principles, modes and levels of communication, the present researcher will be able to explore what happens to the couple's communication pattern in the aftermath of stranger rape.

In this regard, researchers found that victims often indicate to partners that they do not want to communicate about the rape, for various reasons, amongst which may be fears and anxiety about abandonment, acceptance, traumatising flashbacks, feelings of shame and self-blame or feeling blamed by the partner (Miller et al., 1982). However, from a systemic perspective the researcher is not so concerned with why the victim supposedly does not want to "communicate". Instead, her interest falls on what happens to the couple's communication pattern following a message such as the one the victim

is sending. Based on the first communication principle, one cannot not communicate. Therefore, although the victim does not wish to talk about the rape, her interactions, emotions, behaviours and difficulties still contain message value in the context of the couple's relationship and, therefore, she **is** communicating about the rape. Even her statement that she "does not want to communicate about the rape" is communication about the event.

Partners, acutely aware of the victim's behaviours, emotions and difficulties and in constant interaction with the victim, reported that they found the victim's refusal to talk about the rape confusing, and that they were unsure how to respond to the victim (Emm & McKenry, 1988; Smith, 2005). Similarly, just as the victim cannot not communicate, the partner cannot not respond and therefore he is placed in an impossible situation. His response to her distress will inadvertently be communication about the rape, regardless of whether he adheres to the "no discussion" rule or not. Furthermore, the partner is therefore faced with a situation where he is concerned about the victim, but is not allowed to communicate this concern to her. Thus, he is obliged to behave according to a certain class of actions (not concerned), when his body supports another class of actions, namely concern (Efran et al., 1990). Therefore, his communications come across as incongruent, which in turn serves as fertile ground for misinterpretation and misunderstandings in the couple's communication.

According to researchers, another common occurrence is one where both partners collude in not talking, or then supposedly "not communicating" about the rape, by either denying its occurrence or minimising its significance and impact (Barnes, 1995). The collusion not only sets the stage for communication traps from which negotiating an exit is difficult, but also sets the stage for misinterpretation, distortion and misunderstanding, thereby compounding the impact of the rape on their relationship. For example, research shows that the victim often attributes certain meanings to the partner's reluctance to discuss the rape, which may include interpretations such as blame, shame, rejection or abandonment (Emm & McKenry, 1988; Smith, 2005). Similarly, the partner also attributes meanings to the victim's reluctance to discuss the rape, which may include distrust and blame. As a result of their interpretations, both often feel rejected. In accordance with the third communication principle, their interpretations and attributions, although possibly inaccurate, are the personal truths for them. Thus, the couple's collusion in not discussing the rape shuts down open communication about the way they interact as well, thereby making checking and clarification of these attributions and interpretations impossible. Furthermore, it also hinders the couple in the process of co-constructing a different relationship reality and worldview which includes the rape, their responses to it, as well as the new information that has become available in terms of their relationship. As a result, couples often become stuck in disconnected individual realities and a fragmented relational reality.

The above example also serves as an illustration of another communication trap many couples become caught in, regardless of whether or not they have a trauma history. Becvar and Becvar (2003) have referred to this as "mind reading". According to these writers, over time partners become familiar with the way in which the other person communicates and they develop certain expectations from one another based on this knowledge and past experience. This usually culminates in a situation where partners believe that they know the other person well enough to know what they are thinking or feeling, without any discussion of these thoughts or feelings. However, regardless of the partners' experiences and history with one another, each person still remains a separate individual with a personal frame of reference and a unique perspective, creating his or her own reality according to which meaning is ascribed to events and interactions. This may be especially relevant in the context of rape-trauma, as the experiences of the rape victim and partner are likely to be very different, and therefore both partners' usual behaviour and communication patterns may also differ substantially from what these previously were.

Hence, following from the above, there is no way for one partner to "know" what the other partner is thinking or feeling, or to "know" what meaning he or she will ascribe to an event or experience, especially such an out of the ordinary and traumatising event as stranger rape. In the context of stranger rape, unless specifically discussed and confirmed, the victim's interpretations that the partner is withdrawing because he blames her for the rape, or because the rape has made her undesirable to him, represent examples of mind reading. Similarly, the partner's belief that the victim does not trust him enough to disclose information, or blames him for the attack, is also a case of mind reading. From a systemic perspective, the concern is not necessarily with the content of the mind reading, but with its impact on the couple's relationship. From the above it is clear that mind reading and the resultant misperceptions and distortions serve to disconnect and isolate the victim and partner from one another, possibly contributing to system instability in the post-rape context.

It is furthermore important to keep in mind that the above communication impasses do not occur on a clean relational slate, but in the context of the couple's relationship with its specific rules, boundaries and various established patterns, including an established communication pattern (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Although the way the couple behaves and communicates about the rape, about their needs post-attack, about changes and feelings, may be impacted by the rape it will ultimately be determined by these pre-existing habitual or redundant patterns of interaction. These pre-existing patterns may exacerbate or alleviate the impact of the rape on the couple's communication pattern. Similarly, the couple's pre-existing communication pattern may possibly enable them to sidestep communication traps, or contribute to the likelihood of them becoming mired in communication traps.

In addition to the abovementioned communication traps, post-traumatic symptoms could mimic incongruent communication. For example, one of the partners may manoeuvre for closeness by initiating the resumption of sexual activity. The other partner may agree and communicate on the content level that he or she feels comfortable with resuming sexual activities. This may be confirmed on the process level as the sexual activity proceeds. However, post-traumatic symptoms such as flashbacks, dissociation and numbing may interfere and, as a result, the sexual activity may unfold very differently with the victim becoming distressed, dissociating, crying, shouting or pushing the partner away. The message value of these symptoms contradicts the previous content and process level messages. The impact on both partners may be confusion, not knowing or understanding what happened, feelings of guilt or concern about whether they misunderstood one another's initial intention, or miscommunicated their own intentions. If the partners are not able to communicate about what happened in a way which clarifies their confusion and concerns, this may impact on their relationship by bringing about or amplifying distance and disconnectedness.

In addition to the above, from a systemic perspective, symptoms are not understood as located inside the individual, but are regarded as representing a dysfunctional relationship system (Keeney, 1983). Therefore, they are regarded as interpersonal phenomena (Searight & Openlander, 1987). Another way of phrasing this understanding is to view symptoms as metaphors for relationship ecologies (Andolfi, 1983; Keeney, 1979). From a systemic perspective, consideration of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms will not be limited to an individual or intrapsychic perspective. Viewing such symptoms in this way allows the researcher to consider the impact, function and meaning of these symptoms not only in the context of rape and trauma processes, but also in the context of the patterns and processes of the couple system. As such, these symptoms may, in addition to the more individual and intrapsychic perspective, be understood as reflective of changes, instabilities or dysfunctionalities in the couple's relationship and may also serve the function of adjusting to or commenting on new relational dynamics. From this perspective symptoms can be understood as manoeuvres for closeness, distance, support, nurturance, care or for the one-up or one-down position in the relationship. The impact, meaning and function of symptoms can, however, only be understood in the unique context of each couple's relationship.

From a systemic perspective, the focus is essentially on **what** happens in the communication pattern of the couple and the relational impact of communication traps. It is to be expected that misinterpretations, incongruent communications and double binds will contribute to distance, disengagement, rigid boundaries and isolation between partners. As suggested in the previous chapter, one way for couples to exit communication impasses is to meta-communicate. In other words, to

communicate about the way they are communicating. For example, instead of being baffled by the "no-communication" rule, the partner can remark how this confuses him and that he is unsure of how to respond to the victim's messages of distress, such as crying or flashbacks. In this way the partner can express his confusion and concern, communicate his intention to be there for her and clarify with the victim what she needs. However, for the couple to be able to do this, their pre-existing patterns and rules need to include a rule which makes provision for meta-communication (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). If there is no such rule, attempts at meta-communication may also be misunderstood, provoke anger and therefore exacerbate disruption of the couple's communication pattern. In the context of rape-trauma it is also possible that even though a meta-communication rule exists, the partners may be too traumatised to take meta-positions in their relationships.

3.3.9 Triangulation

In the early stages of research into communication and interactional patterns and processes in families, the focus was on dyadic, or two-person, exchanges (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Hoffman, 1981). However, researchers and therapists increasingly realised that triads, or three-person exchanges, were also common in pathological and healthy familial interactions. Bowen (1985) argued that the dyad is stable for as long as it is calm. Severe or chronic stress or anxiety may destabilise the dyad to such an extent, that another party may be triangulated into the relationship in order to diffuse or refocus attention away from the dyad. According to Nichols and Everett (1986) normative developmental, transitional and situational events also engender stress and conflict in family systems. Therefore triads are considered basic interactional building blocks in the structures of relational systems, and may be both functional and dysfunctional.

Researchers have consistently argued that trauma can be triangulated into the couple system (Goff & Smith, 2005; Nelson & Wampler, 2000). In the context of stranger rape this may occur in various ways. In the aftermath of the rape, much of the couple's energy will go into attempting to protect their system from additional threats or disruptions and also into restabilising their system to ensure survival. With the couple expending most of their energy on system maintenance and organisation tasks, it may happen that the rape becomes an organising principle in their system, and even in the larger family system.

As discussed above, closeness-distance struggles are often brought to the fore or intensified by the occurrence of stranger rape, as are issues regarding communication, power and control. Furthermore, the balance in terms of mutual support, caregiving and nurturance may also be disturbed and may bring about a temporary, or longer term, unbalanced flow towards the victim. Thus, the couple may find

themselves in a position where they have to struggle for control of limited resources, to have their needs met in terms of closeness and distance, and for position and power in the relationship. This struggle in itself may produce tension and anxiety, which is likely to feed into and amplify the tension and anxiety brought about by the rape. Paradoxically, despite the fact that the rape is likely to have brought about some of these struggles, or at least contributed to the intensification of pre-existing struggles, through triangulation the rape can also become an ally in the struggle for resources, closeness, power and position. This happens as the couple increasingly becomes stuck in fixed roles and highly repetitive behavioural sequences, such as pursue-withdraw and defend-attack cycles.

The above struggle was especially clear in the discussion on roles and power, where it was pointed out that although it seems that the partner who occupies the rescuer, over-functioner or parental role wields the power in the relationship, the partner occupying the victim, under-functioner or child role is also in a very powerful position in terms of deciding or determining what is to happen in the relationship. In this way, rape-trauma brings about certain needs and struggles which destabilise the system, but through its triangulation into the system, rape-trauma also assists in the development of highly structured, organised and repetitive interactional cycles and patterns which at times may provide one or both partners with a position from where these needs can be met.

Thus, the triangulation of rape into the couple's relationship can be understood as an attempt to reduce anxiety and to provide some sense of stability and resolution. However, rather than stabilising the system, triangulation often leads to rapid oscillations between mutually exclusive positions and intensified struggles, thereby amplifying the instability of the system. Therefore, what initially was an attempt at a solution then becomes a problem since it produces even more instability (Watzlawick et al., 1974).

In the post-rape context, rape is not the only aspect that can be triangulated into the couple's relationship. It may also occur, as in non-traumatised couples, that the couple deals with the distress and anxiety in their relationship by triangulating another person, for example one of their children, a member of the extended family or even a therapist or crisis counsellor.

3.3.10 Change and homeostasis

Closely intertwined with the concepts and principles discussed thus far, are the concepts of homeostasis (stability) and change. According to Bateson (1979) change will always exist in the context of stability and stability comes about through change. Similarly, Keeney (1982, p. 159) stated that "…processes of change are connected to patterns of stability and processes of stability are tied to patterns of change".

Thus, from a systemic perspective, stability and change cannot be separated from one another, as they are two sides of the same coin.

In family systems this means that although a family system may appear to be stable, its homeostasis or stability is always grounded in and maintained by slight fluctuations within certain parameters. An example often given in the literature is the one of balancing oneself on a tightrope – maintaining one's balance on the tightrope requires constant changing of one's position (Keeney, 1982). An example in the context of a couple's relationship is that in order for a marriage to remain stable, the couple has to quarrel from time to time. Such changes in an overall context of stability are referred to as first order changes. In other words, first order change refers to fluctuations or adjustments within certain system parameters, while the stability in terms of system rules, patterns, structure or organisation is maintained (Hoffman, 1981). Thus, first order change is change that occurs **within** a system (Watzlawick, et al., 1974).

On the other hand, second order change refers to a change **of** the system, or change of change (Watzlawick et al., 1974). Furthermore, second order change also entails the amplification of a fluctuation to a point that exceeds the current range allowed by the system's parameters (Dell, cited in Hoffman, 1981). Thus, the said parameters are altered, which also means changes to the system's rules, structure or even organisation. This may lead the system into a new dynamic range of functioning, characterised by more creativity, growth, variety and order, thereby stimulating the system to create new patterns (Bateson, 1979; Tomm, 1984). However, it can also lead to the destruction of the system.

Another distinction between first order and second order change is that first order change can be likened to a gradual shift or movement. In this regard, first order changes are often referred to as "common sense" changes or adjustments which deal with occurrences in, or prevent or deal with problems in a system. On the other hand, second order change often seems illogical and has been likened to a sudden, unexpected jump, rather than a gradual shift (Watzlawick et al., 1974).

The concepts of first and second order change can be applied to this study so as to understand how the couple deals with, and survives, minor and extreme fluctuations in the external and internal system environment. It is expected that the couple system will respond to these fluctuations with both first order and second order changes, depending on what is required to ensure the couple's survival as a system.

As mentioned above, in the aftermath of stranger rape, the couple may be faced with both minor and major fluctuations within their relationship. For example, the victim may, for various reasons,

withdraw from physical intimacy and especially sexual contact with her partner, which could signal a fluctuation in their patterns of connectedness and therefore also in their level of relational closeness. In order to deal with this fluctuation, the partner may respond by pursuing her, thereby attempting to maintain their relational closeness within certain parameters. Punctuating from his position, pursuing is a common sense solution to this fluctuation. However, the more the partner pursues the victim, the more she withdraws since physical intimacy brings painful reminders of the rape. This sets in motion a "more of the same" scenario, in that regardless of how much he pursues her and attempts to minimise the distance in their relationship, she increasingly withdraws and the fluctuations in terms of relational closeness remain or become more extreme. These manoeuvres are examples of first order changes.

However, their system may become stuck in a pattern where the initial common sense solution (first order change) increasingly contributes to repetitive and limited cycles or sequences of behaviour in attempts to restore the system's homeostasis or stability. In this example, the pursuer-distancer sequence of behaviour between the victim and partner becomes repetitive, generalises to other contexts and limits alternative and context-appropriate possibilities in the way the couple relates. At this point, that which was initially aimed at restabilisation of the system may, due to its repetitiveness, rigidity, inappropriateness to context and exclusion of alternative possibilities, escalate or amplify the fluctuations in the system and throw the system into chaos. In the above example, the pursuer-distancer sequence may escalate to acting out behaviour as both partners become increasingly frustrated with the intensification of one another's manoeuvres. Acting out behaviour can take many forms, for example aggressive behaviour, infidelity, or substance abuse. In this way the abovementioned first order changes have become part of the problem. These acting out behaviours may exceed the parameters of acceptable behaviours allowed within the system, pushing the system into chaos. The system will require a change of itself (second order change) in order to deal with this chaos. This may require rule, parameter, structural or organisational changes, which may increase or decrease the system's order and may contribute to or threaten its survival and growth. In the example, the couple may decide to divorce, which will be a second order change as the structure and organisation of the system is destroyed. The couple may alternatively decide to go to psychotherapy, which signifies a transformation of the system's rules (a second order change) to include a meta-communication rule, allowing them to communicate about how they relate.

3.3.11 Secrets and myths

Although family secrets and myths are not systemic principles as such, they are important for understanding and exploring relational and system dynamics, which in turn fall within the realm of

systems theory. Research on rape and sexual abuse has shown that secrecy often surrounds these traumas and also that this secrecy impacts on relationships, by way of its mere presence, regardless of whether or not family members are aware of the existence of the secret (Feinauer, 1982).

Secrets can be defined as "...involve[ing] information that is either withheld or differentially shared between and among people" (Karpel, 1980, p. 295). The use of the words "between" and "among" places secrets in the realm of interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, the words "withheld" and "differentially shared" bring to mind relational processes, such as boundaries, and relational structures, such as alliances and coalitions. Secrets tend to revolve mostly around facts, actual events or incidents, rather than around feelings or thoughts (Nichols & Everett, 1986).

Karpel (1980) distinguished between three types of secrets. **Individual secrets** refer to instances where one family member keeps a secret from all the other family members. **Internal family secrets** involve instances where at least two family members keep a secret from at least one other family member. Lastly, **shared family secrets** refer to secrets in which all the family members know the secret, but are pledged into withholding it from people outside of the family.

It is important to distinguish between privacy and secrets. The difference between the two lies in the way system members define the information that is being withheld and how it is to be shared. According to Karpel (1980), enmeshed systems are more likely to define private material as secret. As discussed earlier, in these systems boundaries are diffuse and everyone is constantly involved in everyone else's business. Thus, it is more likely that a person will feel guilty about withholding information. It is also likely that, when the information is exposed, it will be perceived as a secret and not merely as private information. From this then, other characteristic features of secrets come to the fore, namely the function and impact of secrets in systems.

These functions seem to revolve around the systemic principles of boundaries, power and rules, and especially rules in terms of loyalty and protection. First of all, secrets demarcate boundaries within and around individuals, subsystems and the family (Grolnick, 1983). However, the demarcation not only pertains to the regular subsystems, but is also an indication of the existing alliances and coalitions in a system. An alliance refers to **shared interest** between two members, which is **not shared** by a third. On the other hand, a coalition refers to a process of **joint action against** a third person. In short, the content of the secret often is an indication of whether one is dealing with an alliance or coalition, whereas the manner in which the secret is shared determines who is included and who is excluded, thereby demarcating the boundaries of alliances or coalitions and around the "secret-knowers" and the "unawares" (those who do not know the secret).

With regards to power, some secrets contain an element of "one-upmanship"; in other words, the "secret-knower" feels "one-up" on the person(s) who is/are unaware of the secret (Karpel, 1980). The "secret-knower" may gloat or feel different, merely on the basis of knowing this information and anticipating its potential impact, which in turn will influence the way she/he interacts with others. Furthermore, the "secret-knower" possesses knowledge about information that could be potentially explosive if revealed. This implies an inherent dangerous and unstable tension in power dynamics around the secret, because in order to really experience the full, seemingly useful, potential of the secret it has to be revealed at some point. Owing to recursion, this instability in power dynamics will not be contained in those dynamics only, but will spill over to other system processes, thereby possibly contributing to the destabilisation of the entire system.

Lastly, in terms of system rules, secrets are especially relevant to rules regarding loyalty and protection (Grolnick, 1983). Often the "secret-knower" depends greatly on the loyalty inherent in the relationship with the person he decides to share the secret with. Similarly, the "receiver" of the secret is often bound by the loyalty in their relationship and sworn to keep the secret. The problem arises when the "receiver" also shares a loyal relationship with the person who is the "subject" of the secret (the person who the secret is about), or with other people in the system who are unaware of the secret. The "receiver" finds himself in a precarious situation. If he keeps the secret, he betrays the "unawares" and the "subject", but if he spills the secret, he betrays the "secret-knower". Boszormenyi-Nagy (cited in Karpel, 1980) referred to this as a "split-loyalty pattern". The "receiver's" position becomes especially complicated once the secret is exposed. In addition, loyalty patterns in family systems are not only affected by secrets, but often contribute to the creation and maintenance of secrets, as they function as part of patterns around alliances and coalitions.

With regards to protection, secrets almost always involve some degree of protection. Systemically the question is not about protection of the secret, but rather **who is really being protected, from what and from whom**. According to Karpel (1980) the "secret-knower" may be protecting himself, the "subject", the "unawares", a subsystem or the family as a whole. What is furthermore significant is that if the "secret-knower" is protecting either the "subject" or the "unawares", he does so without consulting those persons. This brings to the fore questions around the power the "secret-knower" wields in making decisions about other people's lives, experiences and also about family life. This is especially the case when the "secret-knower" is also the subject, for instance when the secret is about an extra-marital affair which the "secret-knower" conducted and from which he is now supposedly protecting the rest of the family, or the partner. Thus, in this sense, it becomes very clear that the "secret-knower" is actually protecting himself as well.

Initially, in family therapy, secrecy and secrets were only regarded as pathological. However, over the years and with the evolution of the field away from a deficit focus, it was acknowledged that secrecy and secrets can also be healthy (Grolnick, 1983). Healthy secrets, for example those kept by siblings amongst one another or within the parental subsystem, may assist in the maintenance of generational boundaries and may foster differentiation and autonomy on the one hand, and cohesion within subsystems on the other hand. The functionality or dysfunctionality will depend on the system's specific relational context, the function of the secret in and impact of the secret on the relational context.

From the above it is clear that it is important to consider the impact of secrets in family systems, keeping in mind the potential functionality or dysfunctionality of secrets. From a functional perspective, as mentioned above, the existence of healthy secrets between subsystems can aid in the differentiation, autonomy and appropriate boundary processes in the family system. With healthy secrets one would expect to find alliances, as alliances are based on mutual interest, rather than action against a system member. On the other hand, secrets become dysfunctional when the impact is that of instability, confusion, deception, distortion, isolation, mystification, anxiety, abuse of power stemming from knowledge of the secret, a destruction of family trust, loyalty and cohesion and undermining the reality co-constructed between family members (Grolnick, 1983; Karpel, 1980).

In the context of rape, secrecy regarding the rape may be both functional and dysfunctional. One can hypothesise that if the rape is kept secret from the partner, it is likely to be more dysfunctional, due to the reciprocal impact between the rape and the couple's relational patterns and processes. The impact on the partner may be one of anxiety and confusion, because he will not be in a position to understand or explain, and may therefore misinterpret, the victim's behaviour. Similarly, the impact on their relationship may be one of instability, changing power dynamics, distance and disconnectedness.

On the other hand, keeping the rape secret from the sibling subsystem could be either functional or dysfunctional, depending on various factors such as the children's ages, processes such as triangulation and boundary issues and the way the couple subsystem functions in the post-rape context. Keeping the rape secret from children when they are too young to understand, or may be unduly upset by the information, probably would be more functional. Alternatively, as the rape cannot not have an impact on these subsystems, deciding on how and what to share with the children may be more functional than not sharing anything at all. The couple keeping the occurrence of the rape a secret from their offspring may serve to more clearly demarcate the boundaries between the sibling subsystem and the couple subsystem, especially if one of the children was triangulated into the couple subsystem before the rape.

The rape may replace the child as the triangulated party. However, when dysfunctional, the occurrence of the rape may be shared with the triangulated child, but kept secret from the partner. Similar processes may also be at work in the larger family system. The secrecy around the rape, if retained within the couple subsystem or nuclear family system, may serve to demarcate the boundaries around these systems and the rest of the family. Alternatively, if the secret of rape is shared with a person(s) outside of the nuclear family and not with its members other dynamics may be more relevant.

Consequently, from the above it seems evident that stranger rape, as a secret, can exert a differential impact on the couple and family systems, depending to a large degree on the pre-existing functioning and dynamics of the systems. Often the rape becomes an open secret, or pseudo-secret, where everyone knows about it, but avoids discussion thereof (Feinauer, 1982). Furthermore, secrecy around the rape may also play into other secrecy processes in the couple and family systems, and is likely to disturb the precarious balances around those secrets as well. Thus, consideration of the process of secrecy may be especially relevant in post-rape contexts.

In addition to secrets, family myths are another important process in families, which is not generally apparent to non-family members. A family myth can be defined as "...a fictionalized tale of family life, providing an illusion that often hides a secret. Usually there is some basis in reality, embellished by fantasies of family members and others" (Grolnick, 1983, p. 2). From this definition it seems that family myths are in some ways perpetuated family secrets with a combination of some real occurrence or event, distorted by the mystery surrounding the event. Others have defined family myths as "...pervasive beliefs about what and who the family is, how it should behave, or what each member is and should be like" (Nichols & Everett, 1986, p. 139). In terms of this definition, the function of myths is that they provide a unified conceptualisation or story for the entire family which adds to the family's cohesion. In this way, and like secrets, family myths can be both functional and dysfunctional. Family myths may progressively over the years add to the instability, confusion and exclusion of certain members, subsystems or nuclear families within the extended family system. Alternatively, they could serve to promote stability and continuity of the entire family system. In addition, family myths may reach or be passed down across several generations, and are simultaneously reshaped and remoulded according to the needs of each successive generation (Grolnick, 1983).

In the context of rape, the occurrence of the rape, and the subsequent secrecy surrounding it, may also play into family myths. For instance, if the traumatised couple or family's boundaries suddenly become rigid and exclude the larger family system, pre-existing family stories or myths may be confirmed or disconfirmed by this change. For example, if the specific nuclear family system has always been

regarded as somewhat different, or deviant from the rest of the family, this change may serve to confirm this myth.

Hence, from the above it is possible to argue that adopting a systemic perspective towards stranger rape necessitates that the researcher be aware of and listen for secrets and myths in participants' stories since these often reflect systemic processes, patterns, rules and meanings which may help to clarify the reciprocal impact between the rape and the couple and family systems.

3.4   CONCLUSION

As is evident from the preceding discussion, systemic thinking lends itself well to the analysis of the dynamics, behaviours and interactions of the couple system in the context of stranger rape. Employing a systemic perspective provides the researcher with a broader view and understanding of the couple's relationship and enables her to avoid perpetuating the hide and divide process of rape, by not seeing the partners or their traumas in isolation.

From the above argument it is clear that a systemic perspective brings awareness and consideration of the pre-existing patterns, processes, rules, histories and meanings of the couple within their contexts of living, without which trauma processes often seem confusing, difficult to understand and illogical. Therefore, placing the couple's post-rape experiences and behaviours in their larger relational and system context, is likely to enhance understanding of the couple's relationship in the aftermath of the rape.

As a result, taking a systemic perspective, and focusing on the dynamics and meanings in these systems, enables the researcher to move away from content issues and linear explanations. By gaining an understanding of relational and system dynamics and of what happens in these systems, interventions in couples dealing with stranger rape will be better aimed at creating contexts of healing.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the ontological and epistemological framework of and the research methodology chosen for this study. Firstly, postmodernism as ontology is discussed. Thereafter, the chosen epistemology of social constructionism and its congruence with this study is described. The qualitative research approach will subsequently be discussed as it pertains to reliability, validity, the roles of the researcher and participants, sampling and selection, data collection and data analysis in the study.

4.2 POSTMODERNISM

Ontology can be defined as follows: it "…specifies the nature of reality that is to be studied, and what can be known about it" (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p. 6). In other words, the researcher's ontology determines how he/she sees reality and what he/she believes can be known about that reality. The ontology underlying this study is that of postmodernism. In order to understand postmodernism better, a brief reflection on modernism is necessary.

Modernism denotes an era of major developments in science and technology in the Western world, through which it was believed that human beings were on the verge of mastering and controlling the universe. From a modernistic perspective the world is viewed as understandable, controllable and predictable. Thus, at the core of modernism lies the belief in a knowable world (Kvale, 1992). It is furthermore accepted that there is one objective truth or reality, which can be discovered, studied and understood through the application of objective scientific methods and also that this reality can be accurately represented (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Therefore, it is believed that it is possible for the researcher to remain objective or to have no impact on the subject under study. Science is regarded as providing answers to society's problems and therefore plays a hugely important role, being placed in a very powerful position, due to confidence in the objective knowledge of experts who apparently possess the truth of the "reality out there". Thus, there is a belief in the existence of universal truths and language is regarded as being faithful, unbiased and descriptive of this reality or truth (Fuks, 1998).

Often postmodernism is understood as the opposite of modernism; however, Kvale (1992) argued that it should rather be viewed as a descriptive term which depicts what follows or comes after modernism. First of all, postmodernism rejects the notion of a universal and objective knowledge and furthermore also contends that the world is not controllable, that there is no cause and effect and that there is also no

certainty (Lynch, 1997). Postmodernism's rejection of objective knowledge implies wariness of the ultimate singular explanation or interpretation, and therefore allows for the existence of many alternative accounts, meanings and descriptions, or a multiverse of realities (Doan, 1997). Furthermore, postmodernism also contends that knowledge can never be fully known. Knowledge on any subject is always only one part, or only one, of many possible perspectives and is therefore regarded as ambiguous and perspectival (Rapmund, 2005). In this way each one of us creates his or her reality and these realities are inevitably subjective.

The postmodern philosophy furthermore involves a movement from the intrapsychic self to the person in a network of social relations, or a relational self. This is also sometimes referred to as movement from the inside of the psyche to the text of the world (Kvale, 1992). The self is no longer considered as an isolated or autonomous human being with fixed characteristics, but as a participant in multiple relationships and as varying from context to context. In addition, the "self" and "problems" take shape, and have meaning, only in a specific relational context and are expressed through language (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Thus, "problems" are only perceived as problems because of the way they are constructed or defined in a specific relationship. In this regard postmodernism takes into account the fact that people and "problems" are imbedded in a particular historical and cultural context and focuses on the interrelatedness between this context and the social and linguistic manner in which people co-construct a perspectival reality.

It is, however, important to note that in postmodernism, the self is not eradicated, but is rather enriched through acknowledgement of the "reality of relatedness" (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Disregard of the self would imply disregard of individual realities and would also imply that the "reality of relatedness" has become the new ultimate or singular reality. Thus, it is equally impossible to understand an individual outside the context of a relationship, or to understand the relationship or relatedness if the individual's subjective reality is not considered. From a postmodern point of view then, it is not a matter of either/or, but of both-and, namely consideration of both the individual's subjective reality and his or her reality of relatedness.

Given the understanding that people construct a perspectival reality through language, both language and discourse have assumed a central role in a postmodern world. From such a viewpoint, language acquires meaning through social practice, rather than through a referential base (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Thus, people use a language system to experience and express their knowledge and through this knowing and expression, they simultaneously construct their world and realities. Inherent in the

acknowledgement of the central role of language is the cautioning against assuming that a community's or society's language is true for anyone other than members of that community or society.

Therefore, language is no longer viewed as unbiased or as a mere tool which is representative and descriptive of an external reality. As Foucault (cited in Kvale, 1992) made clear, matters of description cannot be separated from issues of power. Perspectives develop through descriptions and are integrated into society, while simultaneously constructing that society. In this fashion certain discourses, texts or narratives (descriptions) become reified and established as truths. According to postmodernism, these established discourses, texts and narratives have the power to oppress or enable people. Through its wariness towards singular and totalising truths or stories, postmodernism focuses on the deconstruction of oppressing discourses and narratives in order to reconstruct them in a new way which is hopefully more enabling, or at least provides alternatives (Lynch, 1997). This process of deconstruction and reconstruction largely occurs through language.

Thus, from the above it is also clear that postmodernism implies a move towards knowledge which is socially useful (Rapmund, 2005). In this perspective, postmodern researchers, therapists and clinicians are not merely passive reflectors of a universal truth but, rather, active participants attempting to contribute to the transformation of oppressing or marginalising narratives or discourses. Thus, despite the fact that postmodernism acknowledges the existence of a multiverse of realities, it does not postulate that all realities are created equal, or that they are equally valid and coherent (Doan, 1997). Inherent in the message of postmodernism is not the equality of all realities, but rather the inherent danger in any reality, discourse or story that does not allow room for, or does not acknowledge, alternative or marginalised accounts.

Consequently it should be evident that postmodernism implies quite a different view of the world when compared to modernism. The focus is placed on a multiverse of realities, the importance of language both within particular social and relational contexts and also in constructing those contexts. As such, postmodernism, as ontology, converges with a social constructionistic epistemology on various viewpoints. This issue is now explained.

4.3 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Terre Blanche and Durrheim defined epistemology as specifying "the nature of the relationship between the researcher (knower) and what can be known" (1999, p. 6). From this position one can say that a researcher's epistemology determines the way in which he/she understands and views his/her relationship with that which he/she believes can be known or what he/she is attempting to know or

understand. Defining epistemology slightly differently, Bateson (cited in Amatea & Sherrard, 1994) argued that basic to, and implicitly contained in, every description is a "theory of how to describe". According to Bateson this theory constitutes an epistemology; he further described epistemology as "...always and inevitably personal. The point of the probe is always in the heart of the explorer; what is my answer to the question of knowing?" (cited in Amatea & Sherrard, 1994, p. 2). He furthermore stated that the fundamental act of epistemology is drawing a distinction, in other words distinguishing an "it" from a background that is "not it". This activity is also referred to as "punctuation". Everyone distinguishes or punctuates, and by performing this action we simultaneously construct and describe what we see. Thus, following Bateson's definition, it is possible to see that a researcher can never be separate or objective from that which he/she is researching, because his/her searching, seeing and findings will always be subject to the distinctions he/she draws, or the punctuations he/she makes, as well as how he/she thinks about describing these.

Referring to a level extending beyond the individual, Auerswald (1985, p. 1) defined epistemology as "…a set of immanent rules used in thought by large groups of people to define reality". According to this definition, the way in which we understand, think and define reality is essentially constructed by the context and society in which we live. The epistemology underlying this study is that of social constructionism. Social constructionism as an epistemology adheres very closely to Auerswald's definition and is defined as: "…the claim that the content of our consciousness, and the mode of relating we have to others, is taught by our culture and society: all the metaphysical qualities we take for granted are learned from others around us" (Owen, 1992, p. 386). Thus, social constructionism fundamentally postulates that our beliefs about the world are social conventions.

Furthermore, essential to this epistemology is the view that our realities are socially constructed through the use of shared or agreed-upon meanings and that these meanings are communicated via language (Berger & Luckman cited in Speed, 1991). Therefore, social constructionism locates meaning in an understanding of how ideas, attitudes, beliefs and constructs are developed and conversed or discoursed over time, within a social or community context. Looking at and understanding the world in this way, social constructionism posits an evolving set of meanings that emerge constantly from the interactions between people (Hoffman, 1990). For example, in Western society the belief developed that success is measured by material wealth such as a person's car, possessions, house and type of career. However, this belief does not exist in an objective sense and furthermore, looking at other cultures, such as that of the Eskimo, one quickly realises that success can also constitute something completely different. It thus becomes possible to see how the understanding of, or the idea of, success in a Western society is socially constructed through the agreed-upon meanings such a society has come

to attach to aspects such as material possessions. When considering other cultures, it also becomes clear that this idea of success is not universal. Thus, meanings do not exist **within** people, but **between** them as part of the constantly changing stories and narratives which they tell themselves and each other.

In as much as social constructionism regards our realities and meaning as socially constructed, it also regards the idea of the self as socially constructed. The social construction of self implies that we can only know ourselves, our stories, our experience of our environment or contexts and our place in these, through sharing in, or co-constructing, meaning and social interaction with others (Hoffman, 1992). Only through these ongoing conversations with significant others can the individual develop an inner voice or sense of self (Hoffman, 1993). Thus, the individual identity is not within the person or within any other unit, such as a relationship, but it consists of temporal flows which can be simple or complex and is realised in the conversational context and through social interaction. It therefore follows that there is no "true self", but rather that people are communities of selves with each person containing a multitude of voices with varying points of view (Burr, 1995).

Furthermore, following from the assumptions that reality and the self are socially constructed, knowledge is also regarded as socially constructed and as evolving in the space between people through conversation and interaction (Hoffman, 1993). Thus, knowledge is sustained by the social process, by how reality is understood at a given moment, determined by the social and communication conventions in force at the time. In addition, acknowledgement of multiple realities, together with wariness about the singular truth and the expert position, also shifted the focus from a preference for expert knowledge to a preference for stories and knowledge based on people's lived experiences and how they construct meaning from these experiences and knowledge.

From the above remarks it should be clear that language is no longer regarded as a transparent medium for conveying thought or information, but as one constructing the world and the self through its use. Social constructionists are therefore especially interested in normative narratives or "Grand Narratives" and dominant discourses, which are formed by and in turn influence people and against which people measure themselves. These Grand Narratives are supported by firmly entrenched power structures (Doan, 1997). White and Epston (cited in Speed, 1991) also concur that the meanings we assign to behaviour are based on and determined by the specific dominant and interpretative frameworks that are available in our society at a given point in time. Social constructionism challenges these frameworks and suggests that they often form a context for the development of problems by pathologising those who do not meet or adhere to their expectations. People's personal stories or voices are viewed as

frequently silenced, suppressed or denied in favour of the dominant belief system (Coale, 1994). Thus, social constructionism questions the assumed values and morality of the day, and problems in relating are seen "…as being due to the lack of fit of any one person to the idealized roles which are open to them in society" (Owen, 1992, p. 388). As a consequence of these dominant narratives and discourses people begin to think of themselves and their relationships in ways which are consistent with problem-saturated stories (White & Epston, 1990). According to social constructionism, these problematic realities and stories can be deconstructed and reconstructed, or rather co-constructed, in the context of conversation or dialogue, so that meanings are transformed and alternatives are created or acknowledged.

Hence it follows that social constructionism, like postmodernism, does not regard all stories or realities as equally valid. Social constructionism especially holds the view that some stories are not respectful of differences such as gender, race, ethnicity or religion (Doan, 1997) and thereby contribute to problems in people's lives by marginalising or silencing alternative voices or stories.

Social constructionism as epistemology is congruent with the present study, since the researcher is first of all interested in the stories of the participants, based on their personal lived experiences in the context of stranger rape-trauma. Furthermore, she is interested in how couples, dealing with stranger rape, experience and construct the trauma, how they understand its impact on their relationships and how they view, experience and understand their relationships before and after the trauma. Through reflecting on these aspects with the participants, the researcher intends to gain some insight into how the couple, and each individual, recreated meaning and reconstructed their individual and relational realities following the attack. Furthermore, through the participants' descriptions and stories, the researcher hopes to gain a sense of their relationship dynamics and of how these were impacted by and impacted on the way the couple deal, or dealt, with the rape. In accordance with social constructionism, the researcher believes that this can be done in the context of a conversation.

Furthermore, the researcher is also interested in exploring how Grand Narratives and dominant discourses, and the acceptance or rejection of these, silence or marginalise the couple's voice within their community or society and each person's individual voice within their relationship. The researcher also believes that through the research interview, oppressing discourses or narratives can be deconstructed, and co-constructed in a different way which may contribute to a more enabling reality or at least a relationship reality more conducive to healing. The researcher furthermore contends that the participants may bring already deconstructed discourses or narratives to the interview context, and she intends to report on these so that the findings may be useful to other couples dealing with stranger rape,

as well as to other researchers, clinicians and lay persons working with rape victims and their significant others.

In the South African context with its unusually high incidence of rape, one may expect to find discourses and narratives regarding aspects such as "proper or responsible behaviour" for women which, according to societal beliefs, will supposedly minimise a woman's chances of being raped, such as not wearing provocative clothing, not going out alone at night and adhering to conservative moral standards (Connop & Petrak, 2004). In this regard, rape myths seem to have taken on a life of their own and have become Grand Narratives and dominant discourses in their own right. Furthermore, from the literature review it also seemed that women, although marginalised by these accounts, also strongly believe in their so-called truth and correctness. As a result, women are expected to behave differently from men, their freedom is restricted by society and they are marginalised as a group. Paradoxically and ironically men are also marginalised by these accounts, as men are constructed as almost animalistic and as unable to control their urges. These generally dominant discourses also bring to mind the prevailing discourses in research regarding the origin of or reason for rape, namely the well-known sexual desire versus aggression-control debate (Archer & Vaughan, 2001; Groth et al., 1977).

One may also expect to find narratives centring on power relations between women and men. Closely related to discourses concerning such power relations are the dominant discourses or narratives relating to roles, responsibilities and functions in couples, and the acceptance or rejection by the couple of traditional, societal roles, or their development of alternative roles and alternative divisions of responsibilities and functions. Social constructionism holds that people who do not fit into or adhere to these societal prescriptions are often pathologised and it is possible that the occurrence of the rape may then exacerbate a pre-existing non-fit with these roles, or that it may impact on those concerned in a way that brings about such a non-fit.

Finally, in viewing the topic through a social constructionistic lens, the researcher also understands the research process as a collaboration where both the participants and the researcher take part in the co-construction of a research reality and meanings specific to the context of each interview and to the context of this study. Thus, the researcher does not view herself as impartial or objective towards the research subject, and believes that her own lived experiences also colour the lens with which she looks at the world, this research study, the participants and their stories and experiences. Therefore, the researcher's gender, her own experience with and understanding of traumatic events, her understanding of the relationship between men and women, as well as her chosen theoretical framework, are likely to impact on how she describes or punctuates her findings.

By clarifying the ontology and epistemology underlying this study the researcher attempted to create a context for the participants' stories, as well as her interpretations and findings. In the next section the methodology used in the study is set out and explained.

4.4 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim, methodology "...specifies how the researcher may go about practically studying whatever he or she believes can be known" (1999, p. 6). Before qualitative research, as the chosen methodological approach for this study, is discussed in more detail, it is necessary to distinguish a qualitative research methodology from a quantitative method, as they mark a series of different approaches to research.

4.4.1   Quantitative and qualitative methodologies

The most fundamental differences between these approaches relate to the kinds of information or data collected and the kinds of data analysis techniques employed. First of all, the use of the word "data" in qualitative research is sometimes deemed unsuitable or undesirable (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). In this study, however, the terms data and information will be used interchangeably. Quantitative research collects data in the form of numbers and predominantly uses statistical types of data analysis. On the other hand, qualitative research collects information in the form of written or spoken language and recorded observations in language (for example audio or videotaped interviews), and analyses these mainly through the use of identifying and categorising themes (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Basic to quantitative research is the assumption that there is one true reality which is measurable; such research focuses on understanding laws and causes; is outcome orientated; the researcher is viewed as objective and detached; and methods and procedures are predetermined and followed rigorously throughout the research. Contrastingly, qualitative research subscribes to the assumption of multiple realities which are socially constructed and context dependent, so that in seeking meaning, the researcher is viewed as involved and interactive, with methods and procedures fluid and evolving (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). Consequently, it is possible to see that quantitative and qualitative research methodologies embody very different approaches to research, where quantitative research is seen as more coherent with a modernistic ontology and qualitative research is regarded as more coherent with a postmodernistic one.

It should now be evident that the qualitative research methodology is congruent with a postmodern and social constructionistic view and understanding of the world, and therefore it is also appropriate to this study. A quantitative research methodology would not have allowed the researcher to capture the

profound experiences of couples dealing with stranger rape. The researcher furthermore felt uneasy with the superficial nature of quantitative research in a context which she believed required sensitivity, empathy, involvement and more in-depth discussion in order to give voice to, understand and more appropriately describe these couples' experiences. A qualitative approach also allows for the possibility of intervention by the researcher, in the form of changing the direction of questioning or reframing in order to assist the participants in constructing alternative realities and stories, should this be appropriate. The researcher furthermore believed that a qualitative research approach would allow her to use methods which are more likely to appropriately illuminate and explore the relationships, relationship themes and dynamics, and different realities, life experiences and meanings of couples who are dealing with stranger rape, and would also provide an opportunity for their voices to be heard, which may have been silenced by an approach focused on numbers and statistics. In the next section, qualitative research is discussed in more detail.

4.4.2   Qualitative research approach

As was indicated above, this study aims to capture the experiences, existing and emergent meanings and relational and system dynamics of couples dealing with stranger rape. The qualitative research approach sets the following goals, which makes it appropriate for use within this study (Babbie & Mouton, 2002; Kopala & Suzuki, 1999; Moon, Dillon & Sprenkle, 1990):

- Understanding the meaning of naturally occurring events, actions and interactions in context. Thus, research is conducted in the natural settings of participants, or in their contexts of living.

- Understanding a phenomenon from the perspective of the research participants and the meaning that they give to their experiences. Inherent in this goal is the understanding of human or social problems from multiple perspectives.

- The focus falls on a holistic understanding of a phenomenon, rather than on its narrow aspects. Thus, the aim is building a complex, rich and in-depth description of the life of participants, inclusive of meanings, events, actions and interactions.

- The research is inductive, which indicates the researcher's immersion in details and specifics of the information in order to discover important categories, dimensions, interrelationships and patterns.

- The focus is on the process, rather than on outcomes, and this focus furthermore allows for the emergence of meaning and patterns in the research context.

- Finally, owing to the fact that meanings are understood as highly variable across contexts, the goal is not generalisation to some larger theoretical population. Rather, the argument is for transferability, which is achieved by producing rich, detailed descriptions of contexts. These descriptions give the readers of this study an account of the networks of meanings developed in a

specific research context, which should enable them to make a decision about the transferability of the research findings to similar contexts.

In addition to the above, the researcher also included process-oriented research as part of her qualitative research approach. Katz and Mishler (2003) have described process-oriented research as a kind of qualitative research approach, which seems to cohere well with the above goals of qualitative research and also with the process-oriented research described by other researchers. Cummings and Davies (2002, p. 32) described the aim of process-oriented research as "...to describe the specific responses and patterns embedded within specific contexts, histories, and developmental periods that account for effects...over time". Similarly, according to Rice and Greenberg (cited in Owen, 1992), the principles of process research are pattern exploration, process in context, detailed description and observation as well as a discovery-orientation.

Katz and Mishler (2003) also highlighted the similarities between the process-oriented approach and qualitative research in general, namely the focus on patterns, their location within larger institutional, cultural and social contexts and the focus on "what is going on", that is, on the process. Thus, taking a process-oriented view in this study means that the researcher aimed to explore the responses, patterns and process embedded within the couple's relationship context as it is affected by and impacts on the couple's experience of stranger rape. Furthermore, the focus fell on how these relational dynamics emerged in the re-telling of their stories, as well as in the here and now of the research context.

A qualitative research approach is congruent with family systems theory and may also be more effective in addressing the complexity of systems. Family systems theory and qualitative research emphasise social and relational contexts, multiple perspectives and realities (or lived experiences), complexity, individual and system differences, circular causality, recursion and holism. Similarly, through its focus on patterns and contexts, process-oriented research also fits well within the qualitative research approach and family systems theory.

4.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

In this section, the study's research design is discussed according to the characteristics and goals of qualitative research (Moon et al., 1990).

4.5.1 Roles of the researcher and participants

In qualitative research, the researcher adopts a more interactive and participatory role, which means there is an interdependence, inseparableness and interconnectedness between the researcher (knower)

and the object (known) and between the researcher and the participants, which cannot be understood in the context of traditional research requirements such as distance between the researcher and participants or objectivity.

In this regard, the researcher is regarded as the major data or information collection instrument in the research process. However, his/her perceptions are shaped not only by the research process and object under study, but also by the researcher's own personal experiences, biases, beliefs and values stemming from his/her culture or community (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). Due to the intensely personal nature of qualitative research, it is of crucial importance that the researcher is aware of how his/her own processes may impact on the research process. This awareness furthermore facilitates the researcher's connectedness to the particular study and to the participants. The above is congruent with a constructionistic perspective where the researcher is understood to be part of the system that is described.

However, for the researcher this brings about a certain tension between "the illusion of objectivity" and the "borders of subjectivity" (Fine, cited in Kopala & Suzuki, 1999, p. 64) which he/she must negotiate, if the research is to be ethical, reliable and valid. Thus, the researcher must consistently be aware of his/her own biases and values and guard against the inherent danger of interpreting his/her own perspective as that of the participants, thereby distorting the information obtained. However, an awareness of his/her personal perspective simultaneously provides an important source of information and may serve as a guideline which illuminates opposite or alternative perspectives and voices. Furthermore, an openness about his/her own processes enhances the reliability and validity of the research. Through the application of reliability and validity strategies, this tension may be successfully negotiated (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999).

Furthermore, given the researcher's awareness of multiple realities and multiple truths, and understanding and awareness of his/her own biases, experiences and values as constituting only one possible reality or truth, the qualitative researcher also believes that participants are experts of their own lives, realities, stories and experiences. As such, they already know a great deal about the subject being studied and are viewed as collaborators or co-researchers from whom the researcher can learn (Rapmund, 2005). Thus, the interview and contact with participants are regarded as an interactive, egalitarian and parallel process. As part of this process, the researcher should also be mindful of his/her role and of how the participants' perception of this role may impact on the quality of communication, the nature of their relationship and the level of rapport and trust that can be established (Rubin &

Rubin, 1995). It is therefore necessary that the researcher clarifies his/her role and the purpose of the study beforehand in order to ensure the integrity of the research process.

One of the major role issues faced by qualitative researchers, using the in-depth interview method, is that of a conflict between the role of researcher and that of therapist. The emotional content revealed, or the emotional distress of participants that may develop during the interview may create moral and ethical dilemmas for the researcher, as they may blur the line between therapy and research (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). In this regard it is important that the researcher elucidates his/her role early on in the research process, so that the participants are clear regarding the nature of their relationship. However, intrinsic to the in-depth interview is the use of basic counselling skills and therefore, this type of interview still possesses the potential that, despite role clarification, for the participants at least, the line between therapy and research can become blurred. In this regard it is important that the researcher is able to read the process, respond sensitively and supportively, realise when something has been misunderstood, and especially that the researcher knows when to change the direction of questioning and when to retreat. In this regard the standard for in-depth interviewing is that the needs of the participants take precedence over the needs of the research (Rosenblatt, cited in Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). The ethically appropriate way to deal with individuals in need of therapeutic support is to provide a referral and also to manage the situation and ensure that the individual is able to access and receive the necessary support.

Owing to the sensitive nature of the subject under study, the researcher was very mindful of the dilemma inherent in the duality of roles that may develop as part of the research reality co-constructed between the participants and herself. She therefore set out to define her role very clearly and informed the participants that they could at any point stop the interview process or cease their participation in the study. The couples were also made aware of the potential impact the study might have in that it could bring to the surface material that has been forgotten, or pushed aside, and also that it may bring to the fore new material, problems, daunting and exciting challenges and even strengths that the couple had not been aware of before. The researcher also disclosed to the participants that she would, from her side, discontinue the interview process, or participation in the research process, should she feel that the process was in any way harmful or damaging to the couple or individual participants and that a referral for therapy would be discussed with the couple at that juncture.

Part of the clarification of her role as researcher related to disclosure of and making explicit the reasons for the study. The researcher informed the participants that she was interested in the experiences of couples dealing with stranger rape from the point of view of these couples, especially in light of the

apparent lack of resources available to couples in the aftermath of such a trauma. She also disclosed to the participants that current research available on the subject of rape, increasingly acknowledges the impact of such an experience on couples' relationships and increasingly identifies the need for inclusion of both partners as a unit in the conducting of research, and in the provision of therapy. They were also informed that their stories could contribute to the expansion of what is known about the impact of stranger rape on couple relationships and that their stories and experiences might be helpful to other people going through similar experiences.

4.5.2 Reliability

Traditionally reliability has been described as "the extent to which a research endeavour and findings can be replicated" (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999, p. 26). However, from a social constructionistic point of view, there is no singular, stable unchangeable external reality which can be investigated. Furthermore, the information obtained during the research process is also viewed as a co-construction between the researcher and participants, and therefore is regarded as an artefact of their conversation and the research context. Thus, in social constructionistic research, the expectation is not that findings can be replicated, but rather that individuals, groups, relationship systems and organisations will behave differentially, will express different opinions and that a different research reality will be created which is specific to the context, participants and researchers taking part in the research, and the processes between them.

Trustworthiness and dependability are generally regarded as alternatives to the more modernistic concept of reliability. Dependability "...refers to the degree to which the reader can be convinced that the findings did indeed occur as the researcher say they did." (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999, p. 64). According to these writers, this is achieved through rich and detailed descriptions which illustrate the rootedness and development of actions and opinions, flowing from the interaction in the research context and as part of the research process. According to Stiles (1993), the trustworthiness of research refers to the elements of "good practice" present throughout the research. These are the following:

Disclosure of orientation, in other words disclosure by the researcher of his/her expectations, theoretical allegiance, preconceptions and values that may have an impact on the study. Disclosure of the researcher's orientation creates a specific context and helps the reader to put the researcher's interpretations in perspective. In this study, the researcher's particular orientation to the research process, namely a postmodern ontology and social constructionistic epistemology, impacted on how she viewed reality, what she expected to find, and how she punctuated, described and interpreted what she saw and experienced. As such, she did not set out to find "truth" or to prove hypotheses, but rather

to share in people's lived experiences and to describe these as they were reconstructed and shared during the interviews and in the research process. Furthermore, the researcher's preference for the theoretical framework of family systems theory most likely impacted on her research findings in that the focus was decidedly more on relational and system dynamics, as well as meaning construction, rather than a more traditional individualised approach to rape victims and their partners.

In addition to the above, the researcher's orientation was also influenced by her experience of her family following a traumatic physical injury which resulted in physical limitations for one of her parents. This experience created an awareness of and interest in families' and couples' relational dynamics and meaning constructions in the context of trauma. More specifically, it resulted in an interest as to how these dynamics and constructions may impact on the way in which a couple or family system deals with trauma, and also how trauma may impact the couple and family system in the process.

Thus, although not trauma experienced in the context of stranger rape, the researcher's experience of trauma is likely to have created certain preconceptions, ideas and values which could impact on her expectations and also her interpretations in this study. Through conducting this study, the researcher has also reflected on her own lived experience and was given the opportunity to reconstruct the story of her experience in a more empowering way, giving a voice to previously overlooked and unknown understandings and possibilities.

The researcher believes that this study will provide some transferable ideas or insights into couples' relationships in the context of stranger rape-trauma, especially in view of South Africa's high rape statistics. Through this study, the researcher also became aware of the lack of resources available to these couples, and she hopes that this study will be especially useful in terms of how couples dealing with stranger rape are understood and assisted in the aftermath of the rape.

Explication of social and cultural context refers to making explicit the social and cultural context in which the study takes place, and therefore also the social and cultural contexts of the participants and the researcher. In the context of this study, and especially due to the fact that in South African society, rape is still predominantly understood as a crime committed mainly by men against women, it may be especially significant that the researcher is female. In a sensitive context such as this, the researcher's gender may impact on the way the participants share, what they share and the meaning constructed in the research process between the participants and the researcher.

Furthermore, although all the participants in this study coincidentally are Afrikaans-speaking, the researcher did not set out to focus on any specific ethnic or cultural group. The selection of these couples for the study was based on their availability, willingness to participate and their adhering to the study's requirements, set out later in this chapter. Regardless of the fact that the researcher did not set out to focus on Afrikaans-speaking participants, the fact that all participants are from a specific ethnic and cultural group, will have a bearing on the transferability of the findings of the study.

In addition to the above, the researcher should also make explicit, to the reader, the reason for the study as it impacts on the way in which the participants and their stories are viewed. As mentioned before, her interest in couples dealing with trauma was born out of the researcher's earlier life experiences and a wish to understand and make sense of relationship and family functioning in the context of trauma. In addition to the above and as a result of the literature review, the researcher also realised that couples dealing with stranger rape are generally viewed from an individualistic and pathological perspective with an emphasis on what each partner should or should not do. One of the main reasons for this study was to provide an alternative way of understanding these couples by moving beyond models, beyond individual syndromes or circumscribed phases according to which the victim and her partner supposedly deal with the rape, and beyond limiting and pathologising views of aggression and anger in the aftermath of stranger rape, of the victim as dependent and powerless and of the partner as identifying with the rapist. This alternative understanding of the couple dealing with stranger rape views their experience in the context of their relationship, and larger systems of relatedness, and attempts to understand what happens in these couples. In other words it suggests a focus on the relational and system dynamics discussed in earlier chapters, on how the couple understands what is happening and how this can be reframed or reconstructed in a way that harnesses the couple's pre-existing, overlooked, forgotten or newly found strengths, thereby also enhancing their relationship as a context of healing.

Description of internal processes of investigation concerns the researcher's internal processes while conducting the study and developing interpretations, or in other words, the impact of the study on the researcher. These are to be described and shared with the reader, as this forms part of the meaning of observations and ultimately comprise part of the study's context. The above was achieved in this study by the researcher's reflections on the research process throughout, as well as by sharing the impressions and impact of each couple's experiences and stories on her as part of the research process.

Engagement with the material denotes the researcher's relationship with the participants, as well as her relationship with the material or information elicited. First of all, in this study, the researcher

reviewed the literature available on rape and sexual trauma, on trauma in general, as well as individual and relationship dynamics in the context of trauma. Furthermore, she also established a relationship of trust and acceptance with the participants whereby she sought to understand the world and their experiences from their perspectives. Lastly, after the interviews were transcribed she immersed herself in the information obtained, by reading and re-reading the transcriptions of the interviews and narratives written by the participants and moving back and forth between her interpretations and these texts.

Iteration: cycling between interpretation and observation concerns the recycling of the researcher's theories and interpretations with the participants or with the text. Firstly, in this study, this was carried out during the interviews since the researcher reflected her understanding of the participants' stories and experiences to them, which provided opportunities for the participants to correct the researcher's observations and interpretations. Furthermore, she entered into dialogue with the transcribed and written texts, once again reading and re-reading the texts, conceptualising and re-conceptualising her interpretations and understandings.

Grounding interpretations has to do with the connections the researcher makes between observations, the content of the interviews, context and interpretations. In the study this was done by linking themes and categories with examples from the transcribed interviews.

4.5.3 Validity

In qualitative research, as in quantitative research, validity is integral. Traditionally, validity has been described as "the extent to which findings can be considered true" (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). Once again, from the perspective of social constructionism and qualitative research the idea of representing the "truth" constitutes a problem, as it is understood that there are multiple truths. In qualitative research the shift has been from a focus on the truth of statements to a focus on an understanding by people. Therefore, in qualitative research validity becomes "a quality of the knower, in relation to his/her data and is enhanced by alternative vantage points and forms of knowing" (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999, p. 29). Thus, validity becomes a function of the researcher's relationship with the said data or information and is enhanced by his/her ability to punctuate from various perspectives or to acknowledge the existence of various truths.

According to the above writers, Stiles (1993) defined validity as based on two dimensions: validity that depends on fit or agreement, namely coherence, testimonial validity and consensus / stability / replication; and validity that depends on change or growth, namely uncovering and self-evidence,

catalytic validity and reflexive validity. These are now discussed, together with triangulation, as they relate to validity in this study (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999; Stiles, 1993):

Triangulation is seen as the overriding type of validity. Put simply, this means seeking information from multiple data sources, using multiple methods and multiple prior theories or interpretations, as well as assessing the convergence of all of these. Guba and Lincoln (cited in Stiles, 1993, p. 608) described triangulation as fairness and argued that "an interpretation is fair to the extent that it honours alternative constructions, including those of the participants". Thus, triangulation enables the researcher to obtain multiple perspectives on the information gathered through research. In this study, triangulation was achieved by gaining information from a review of existing literature; by requesting the participants to write about their experiences individually, thereby gaining information from each individual respectively; by conducting taped interviews with each couple, thereby gaining information from the couple; by reviewing the taped interviews, thereby using the researcher's meta-observations as an additional source of information, and finally by engaging in dialogue with the supervisors of the study.

Coherence includes the quality of fit of all the elements of the study, namely the researcher's intentions in carrying out the study, the literature reviewed, her theoretical framework, ontological and epistemological lens, the information gathering methods, and the interpretations of the participants' experiences and stories. In essence the coherence of the study is determined or assessed by its readers.

Testimonial validity links closely with the above, and refers to clarifying or validating the accuracy of interpretations with the people whose experience is reflected by those interpretations. As mentioned earlier, this was accomplished by the researcher clarifying her interpretations with participants during the first interviews. Furthermore, during the second interview she also clarified with participants any information that was unclear from the written reflections and the first interview. In this way the participants became more than participants, indeed also co-researchers. Attending to testimonial validity also kept the researcher aware that there is more than one interpretation, and also consistently illuminated the respective realities of the participants.

Consensus among researchers; replication essentially denotes the validity of interpretations as discussed with other researchers, often through peer debriefing. In this study, interpretations were discussed with the supervisors of the study and their alternative interpretations were included as part of the study.

Uncovering; self-evidence refers to the researcher making sense of his/her experience and interpretations and determining whether his/her concerns have been answered. Rosenwald (cited in Stiles, 1993) called this self-evidence, meaning that the research and interpretations feel right to both the reader and the researcher and also that they yield appropriate action.

Catalytic validity signifies the degree to which the process re-orients, focuses and energises participants. Thus, it is a similar process to that of uncovering internal processes within the researcher and the reader. The researcher hopes that through this study, the participants were also able to uncover different views and interpretations of their experience, and were able to construct alternative stories which allow for change, growth and enrichment.

Reflexive validity refers to how the researcher's way of thinking is changed by the information gathered in the research process; in other words, the way(s) in which the participants' stories and their experiences of their daily lives, and the researcher's interpretations of these, fold back onto the researcher's initial theory and way of thinking so that his/her theory is modified. This also results in changes regarding how he/she interprets, understands and views the information. In this research, the participants' experiences altered the way the researcher thought about and understood stranger rape-trauma in relationships, and also how she thought about relational and system dynamics in general.
The foregoing discussion should have made clear that validity, in the context of a qualitative research approach, is aimed at the coherence of all the elements in the network of meanings around a study.

4.5.4 Ethical considerations

In qualitative research the main method of collecting information is through human interaction. Inherent in this process of interaction are also the risks associated with such interaction, namely embarrassment, anger, violation of privacy, intrusion, misunderstandings and differences in opinions and values which may lead to conflict. Ethical concerns in qualitative research revolve around the following topics (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999):

Informed consent: The principle of informed consent requires that the researcher provides participants with sufficient information about the research, in other words, he/she should give participants full, non-technical and clear explanations of the tasks expected of them, so that they can make an informed choice in terms of voluntary participation (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). In addition, voluntary participation also implies that the participants can withdraw from the research at any time (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). Furthermore, even after informed consent is obtained, the researcher should remain available to answer questions and concerns which participants may have about the process. In this way

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informed consent is more than signing a consent form, but consists of an ongoing process requiring two-way communication between the researcher and participants. In this study, the researcher followed the above guidelines for obtaining informed consent from participants.

Confidentiality: Part of the informed consent form assures participants of the parameters for confidentiality applicable to the information they supply. In this study, the issue of confidentiality was especially pertinent given the sensitive nature of the study. Confidentiality was discussed with the participants, and included aspects such as whether or not they wanted to make their identities public, the use of pseudonyms, who would have access to the information they supplied, how it would be used, recorded and presented and finally the assurance that the taped recordings would be safely stored and destroyed by the researcher when they were no longer required.

Competence: Owing to the sensitive nature of the topic under study, the researcher's first concern was the welfare of the research participants and the protection of their rights and dignity. In qualitative research, no guidelines exist in terms of determining what should be considered public and what private (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). The present study deals with what usually remains extremely private and therefore the researcher had to be especially mindful of how she dealt with this issue. She limited enquiry and collection of information to the realm of the study and in such a fashion that it fell within her field of expertise. Given the disempowering and controlling nature of a crime such as rape, it was important to the researcher that, at all times, she respected the autonomy of the participants and consequently it was made clear to them that they did not need to feel compelled to answer questions with which they felt uncomfortable; once again it was emphasised that they could withdraw from the study at any point. Lastly, the researcher also clarified her role to the participants.

4.5.5 Sampling and selection

Sampling involves decisions about "which people, settings, events, behaviours and / or social processes to observe" (Durrheim, 1999, p. 44). The usual sampling techniques, as employed in a quantitative research approach, are not appropriate for use in qualitative research. In the latter various criterion-based selection techniques are used, the intention being to identify participants who fit the requirements of the study. In addition, because the focus of qualitative studies is to understand, and not to generalise to a larger population, a few cases are studied intensively in their natural context (Moon et al., 1990).

Thus, in qualitative research the selection of participants is guided by the focus of the study, as described earlier. The criteria for selecting participants for this study included:

- The female partner had been a victim of stranger rape.

- The couple had been involved in a monogamous intimate relationship for at least one year prior to the rape and should either be married or co-habiting.
- The couple were still involved in a monogamous relationship with one another at the time of participation in the study.
- Both partners agreed to participate in the study and were willing to share their personal experiences relating to the rape.

In this study, the researcher used the sample method of purposive and convenience selection. After the researcher established the criteria for participation in the study, she set out to find suitable participants. The researcher has been involved as a voluntary trauma counsellor with a crisis centre for a number of years. She therefore approached the head of the centre, informed her of the study, the reasons for it and what the researcher hoped to achieve. The head of the centre, in turn, approached the managing committee of the centre and presented the researcher's request to them. The managing committee approved the study and the researcher was given access to the centre's archives in order to locate participants for the study. From this process, the researcher managed to come across one couple who fitted the above criteria and were willing to participate in the study. The researcher also contacted another trauma centre dealing specifically with rape victims. The psychologist at this centre provided the researcher with names and telephone numbers of possible participants. One couple from this trauma centre agreed to participate in the study. Finally, the researcher was put in contact with another couple through mutual acquaintances of the researcher and the couple.

In addition to the above process which the researcher followed in terms of gaining access to possible participants, she then had to decide on how to contact them. The researcher was very aware of the inherent limitations, distance and "coldness" of telephonic contact, especially given the sensitive nature of the study, but had no other way to establish initial contact with prospective participants. Much thought went into the process of contacting the participants, as the researcher was concerned about the potential impact of the telephone call. The researcher decided that she would call participants at around six o'clock in the evening, and preferably on their home telephone numbers to minimise the chances of them being confronted with unexpected traumatic memories in a public context. In cases where the researcher did not have home telephone numbers, she informed the prospective participants that she was conducting research about sensitive issues and would prefer to contact them at the time and place that they thought would suit them best. A time was then set for a second telephone call at the person's convenience.

During the initial telephonic contact the researcher attempted to create a context wherein she clarified her identity, her connection with the tertiary institution as a student and researcher, as well as the fact that her research pertained to the experience of trauma, so as to, in some way, prepare the participants for introducing the content of the rape into the conversation. At this point prospective participants were given a choice regarding whether or not they were interested in participating in the study. When prospective participants indicated that they were indeed interested, an appointment was made with the couple for a face-to-face interview during which the process and implications could be discussed in more detail. During this interview personal data was obtained in the form of a genogram which included information such as age, length of marriage or relationship, date of the rape, education, occupation, culture, and the names and ages of children where applicable. From there a second appointment for the in-depth interview was made at the couple's convenience.

4.5.6 Data collection

In qualitative research, information is usually collected in verbal or visual form, rather than numerical or statistical form, and can be gathered through interviewing, document analysis and participant observation (Moon et al., 1990). As mentioned earlier, the researcher is regarded as the primary research instrument. In this study, and as part of the triangulation of the information collected, the researcher decided to ask participants to write about their individual experiences, as well as to conduct in-depth interviews with the couples. The researcher is of the opinion that this method is consistent with the research study, since it provided her with each individual's perspective on the rape and on their relationship, thereby making it possible to understand the couple's relationship and the impact of the rape on their relationship by punctuating from an individual and relational level. In Bateson's (1979) terms, this provided the researcher with a double description of the couples' relationships. Throughout the research process the researcher was also concerned about not doing harm, and therefore, the request to the participants to first write about their experiences was an attempt to sensitively approach the subject under study, rather than suddenly intruding into the couple's context of living with a recording device and focusing on their experience of the rape. The researcher was also of the opinion that these reflections could be utilised as an introduction to the second interview.

- Individual reflections / writing task

During the first face-to-face interview the participants were requested to reflect on their individual experiences of the rape and the impact on their relationship by writing about this, before the second interview. They were given general guidelines (see appendix B), but it was emphasised that these were merely guidelines, the use of which remained their choice, and the participants were encouraged to tell

their stories in the way that felt most comfortable for them. The researcher emphasised that she was especially interested in their experience, stories and understanding. No other requirements or limitations were set on the task in terms of length, style or content. It was explained to the couple that the researcher would use these writings as part of the research, and also that those parts of the writings that the individuals felt comfortable sharing with one another, could form part of the second interview.

At this point it is necessary to mention that the first couple requested whether it was possible for Belinda (the female partner and rape victim) to rather tape her individual reflection using the researcher's tape recorder. The couple explained that due to her intellectual limitations, she finds writing difficult and uncomfortable. The researcher accepted this suggestion, since she felt that it would be more appropriate and in keeping with her intention for this task, namely that it reflects each partner's individual experience. Having someone assist Belinda in writing about her experience may possibly have included that person's interpretation of Belinda's experience in the reflection. The researcher transcribed Belinda's taped individual reflection.

- Interviews

The in-depth interview method was employed as one of the information collection methods. An interview can be defined as: "...a complicated, shifting, social process occurring between two (or more) individual human beings, which can never be exactly replicated. We cannot get at some 'objective truth' that would be there if only the effects of interpersonal interaction could be removed..." (Jones, 2004, p. 259). All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Two interviews were conducted with each couple. The researcher decided that during the first interview, in addition to discussing and clarifying the research process with the couple, she would conduct a genogram with each partner. This decision was made for various reasons. The researcher was of the opinion that, given the sensitive nature of the subject under study, first conducting genograms with the couple would provide an opportunity to build rapport and trust with the participants, before opening up the subject of rape. As such the researcher could first communicate her interest in and regard for their experiences and relationship as a couple and second, respectfully and in a less-threatening manner, approach the subject of the rape. Furthermore, the genogram also fits with the theoretical approach of family systems theory, because it provides a useful tool to explore the couple's relationship patterns and processes in terms of, for example, boundaries, enmeshment, disengagement and roles. In the context of this study, it also provided the researcher with a clear understanding of the possible sources of support available to the couple in the aftermath of the rape. Finally, she also believed that partners' interaction with one another during the discussion of their genograms, and the

couple's relationship with each partner's family of origin, might provide her with additional information in terms of the couple's relational and system dynamics, thereby further illuminating the latter.

Although the information above highlights the researcher's approach to the first interview with each couple, these interviews unfolded very differently for all the couples. The differences in the process that unfolded with each couple can be understood as the unique reality that co-evolved or was co-constructed between each couple and the researcher.

The second interview was aimed at a more in-depth discussion of the couple's experiences following the rape. The process of the second interviews was flexible as the researcher needed to accommodate and adjust her questions based on the information shared by each couple in the written reflections and in the first interview, and also as the second interview unfolded. The interviews focused on participants' experiences of stranger rape in the context of their relationships; on how their relationships had changed or remained the same since the rape occurred; on what had changed and what had remained the same; on what struggles and challenges they faced and what they believed their strengths and the strengths of their relationship were. The questions that the researcher posed were partly informed by the information gained from the literature review, partly by the information introduced by each couple (both during the interviews and through their written reflections), partly by her own biases and expectations and partly by the process, meaning and context that evolved between the researcher and each respective couple.

The focus was placed on asking "what" and "how" questions, as these questions tend to access and elicit material of which the participants have direct experience and knowledge (Stiles, 1993). Through the use of unstructured questions, the researcher attempted to gently guide the development of the conversational context to subjects relevant to the study and to capture the participants' experiences, meanings, emotions and thoughts.

At this point it is necessary to mention that the information obtained during the second interview with the second couple (Liesel and Corne) had shortcomings due to frequent interruptions during the interview, the couple's communication style and the conversational reality that evolved between the researcher and the couple. The researcher decided to approach the couple for an additional interview to which Liesel agreed, but Corne declined due to work obligations. He did however agree to answer any additional questions via e-mail. A list of questions were drawn up and sent to Corne. These questions also formed the basis of the individual interview with Liesel. This additional information was included in the researcher's interpretations of this couple.

- Procedure

The interviews were scheduled at times that were convenient for the participants. The researcher conducted the interviews herself, and used audiotapes to record all interviews. As noted previously, the researcher transcribed all the interviews, and after transcription, immersed herself in the interviews by reading and re-reading the typed texts and the participants' written reflections, making connections between the texts and her observations, experiences and interpretations.

4.5.7 Data analysis

Analysis of information is the process whereby the researcher imposes order, structure and meaning on the information collected in a qualitative research study (Rapmund, 1996). In qualitative research information can be analysed in various ways; however, when the goal of analysis is understanding and meaning, more interpretive approaches are warranted. The aim of an interpretive approach is to provide a "thick description" and emphasis is placed on how participants experience and understand their worlds, how they make sense and share meaning about their lives (Geertz, 1973; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Thus, in interpretive research a thorough description of the participants' contexts, processes and meanings is provided. However, the focus falls not only on collections of such descriptions, but also on placing these descriptions into some kind of perspective. A well-known saying associated with interpretive research is: "To make the strange familiar and the familiar strange", which requires the researcher to stay close to the information or data (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). Consequently, rather than merely describing the information from a more distant meta-position, the researcher also interprets information from a more subjective position of empathic understanding. In other words, in interpretive research, data analysis requires the researcher to move between description and interpretation, between being more distant and being close, and between the familiar and the strange.

The data analysis method chosen for this study is that of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, as a type of methodology, is congruent with a qualitative research approach as it values understanding, interpretation and the discovery of meaning in people's lived experiences (Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Messer, Sass & Woolfolk, 1988). Human beings attribute meaning to what happens in their lives and this meaning is expressed in various verbal and non-verbal ways (Addison, 1992). The attribution of meaning is informed by personal histories, social and cultural structures and contexts, shared practices and understandings, language and the immediate context (Addison, 1992; Martin & Sugarman, 2001). Therefore hermeneutics takes into account the fact that human beings cannot be understood outside of their social and cultural contexts and acknowledges that meaning, interpretation and understanding will always be subjective and contextually and interpersonally grounded.

Schleiermacher (cited in Palmer, 1969) emphasised the importance of the interpreter (researcher) in the process of interpretation and understanding. The researcher enters into the research context, the participants' contexts and the analysis process with his/her own values and beliefs which will inevitably inform the interpretations, understanding and meanings he/she attributes to the information obtained during the study (Addison, 1992). Schleiermacher (cited in Palmer, 1969) further described the interpretation process using the concept of the "hermeneutic circle". The hermeneutic circle refers to the idea that the researcher's understanding of the text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts and his/her understanding of each individual part is established by reference to the whole. Thus, the one cannot be understood without the other, which means that the researcher continuously moves between the parts of the text and the text as a whole. This once again implies a position of closeness or being part of the text, and a meta-position which enables the researcher to consider the text as a whole. The hermeneutic circle is not only applicable to the text, but also to the whole research process. Through conversation, interpretation and understanding, a recursive process, circle or dance (Messer et al., 1988) takes place between the researcher, the participants, the phenomenon under study and the transcribed texts, which may bring about transformation of the researcher's and participants' ideas, values and beliefs.

Hermeneutics, with its focus on interpretation, understanding and discovery of meaning and its acknowledgement of the interpersonal dance in the research context, fits with the theoretical framework of this study. Through the use of hermeneutics, the researcher attempted to interpret and arrive at an understanding of couples who have experienced and were dealing with stranger rape. Also, with hermeneutics' basic premise being the interconnectedness of the parts and the whole, the methodology was especially suited to attempt to understand and interpret the ever-changing and continuous movement of partners, their relatedness, their mutual meaning-making processes and their patterns of interaction as observed in the research context and described by themselves. Hermeneutics, with its acknowledgement that meaning derives from a shared understanding, is informed by social and cultural contexts, and is therefore co-constructed between the researcher and participants, also fits the researcher's chosen epistemology of social constructionism.

Hermeneutics does not propose a set of prescribed techniques. The following approach has been adapted from Addison (1992), Rapmund (2005), Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999) and Wilson and Hutchinson (1991) and was applied in the present study:

Step 1: Familiarisation and immersion. During this step the researcher read and re-read the transcribed interviews separately in order to immerse herself in the world created by these texts and to make sense of that world.

Step 2: Thematising. During this step, working with each couple's transcribed interviews separately, the researcher inferred themes underlying the research material, highlighting parts of the transcribed texts and grouping these with relevant comments in the transcript margins.

Step 3: Coding. During this step, the researcher grouped together similar instances under the same theme, which required her to take a meta-view and to group certain themes together under larger, more inclusive themes.

Step 4: Elaboration. During this stage the researcher explored the generated themes more closely. This enabled her to gain a fresh perspective and deeper meaning than was possible from the original coding system. Themes were modified accordingly. Dialoguing occurred between the researcher and the text, between what she read and the participants' contexts, between the researcher and research done by others. The researcher continuously moved back and forth between individual elements of the text and the text as a whole, while maintaining a questioning attitude, looking for misunderstandings, incomplete understandings, deeper and alternative meanings and changes over time. In this regard analysis can be described as "…a circular progression between parts and whole, foreground and background, understanding and interpretation, and researcher and narrative accounts" (Addison, 1992, p. 113).

Step 5: Interpretation and checking. This step refers to the final account or narrative that relates to the research, namely the experiences of couples dealing with stranger rape and entails the interpretation of each couple's story, as seen from the researcher's perspective. The researcher made use of thematic analysis which involves identifying common themes from the information and employing excerpts from the participants' stories to substantiate those themes.

4.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter the researcher discussed postmodernism, social constructionism and qualitative research as respectively the ontology, epistemology and research approach underlying the present study, and attempted to illustrate their congruence with each other and with the study. In principle this congruence is based on their shared assumptions of multiple realities, the importance of historical, social and cultural contexts, the importance of language, their view of the interconnectedness of the researcher and participants, and the manner in which knowledge and meaning are co-constructed between researcher and participants through the research process.

By clarifying the position from which she punctuated her findings, the researcher also acknowledges that her interpretation and findings are inevitably subjective and personal. It therefore follows that the themes she identified were coloured by her personal perspective or lens and they may not necessarily

represent the absolute truth about the realities of the participant couples. Thus, there may be additional themes that could be identified from the couples' stories and the researcher also acknowledges that the reader or other researchers may interpret and understand the participants' stories and experiences very differently. However, in keeping with her ontology and epistemology, the researcher regards these different understandings and additional themes as part of the dance in the context of this research.

More importantly, by making known the lens through which she looks at and understands her world, the researcher attempted to create a context for participants' stories that allows the profoundness and richness of their accounts to emerge. She hopes that by giving voice to these accounts in such a way she was able to honour the wish expressed by all of the participants, namely that these accounts and their experiences will also be of value to other couples who have had to deal with stranger rape, as well as professionals and lay persons working in the trauma field.

Following the richness and complexity of the couples' stories, the researcher decided to discuss each couple's story in a separate chapter, which comprises the next three chapters of this study. The information obtained from the couples' written reflections and interviews will be carefully explored and emerging themes will be highlighted and compared to the systemic principles and literature review discussed in chapters two and three. Excerpts from the information provided by the couples will be added to support the significance of the identified themes. Given the silence that has previously engulfed couples' voices in the rape-trauma research field the researcher hoped that setting aside a chapter for each couple would create a context where their voices could emerge clearly.

CHAPTER 5

BELINDA AND JANDRE: TRANSFORMING THEIR DANCE AS A COUPLE

5.1 THE CONTEXT

The couple lives in a modest flat in a security complex of a middle class suburb, owned by Jandre's biological mother. From the interior of their home it was clear that they were experiencing financial difficulties. However, they managed to create a warm and welcoming home with the little that they possess.

5.2. INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

5.2.1 Telephonic contact

The researcher initiated contact with all the couples by contacting the rape victim first. On initial contact with Belinda and Jandre, and before the researcher could explain the reasons for her call, Belinda promptly handed the phone to Jandre. This would become the pattern for all future telephonic contact between the couple and the researcher. During the first interview, it became apparent that Belinda is intellectually handicapped and has a speech impediment, which complicates telephonic conversation with people who are unaware of these facts.

5.2.2 Interviews

The couple was eager to participate in the research as they felt it was important and would be of value and helpful to other couples who have had similar experiences. Jandre came across as relaxed; he easily engaged in conversation with the researcher and rapport was established fairly easily. Belinda was more reserved and came across as self-conscious about her speech limitations. Furthermore, at times, her speech impediment made it difficult for the researcher to adequately understand her. As the conversation unfolded and the researcher became used to her way of speaking, she also seemed to relax, became more talkative and rapport was established.

As the first interview unfolded it was clear that, in comparison to Belinda, Jandre was more comfortable talking about his experiences of the rape and its aftermath. He also often spoke for Belinda, answering questions on her behalf and elaborating on her experiences and feelings. At times, during the first interview, the result was that the researcher experienced his voice as overpowering Belinda's voice. However, while transcribing the first interview and during the second interview, it became evident that Belinda's voice was not overpowered by Jandre's. Rather, the way Belinda and

Jandre came across individually was reflective of, or provided a glimpse into, their usual communication pattern as a couple. In addition to the researcher's observation of the couple's communication during the interviews, they also provided a succinct description of their communication pattern. This pattern entails that, by withdrawing or becoming more silent than usual, Belinda communicates non-verbally to Jandre that there may be an issue that needs clarification or discussion. Jandre, in turn, is generally very aware of Belinda's limited verbal skills and finely attuned to her non-verbal communications. In this regard he notices when she withdraws or becomes quieter and he then manoeuvres for closeness by approaching her and encouraging her to speak up. Belinda reciprocates by opening up to him. By letting Jandre support her in verbally communicating about concerns and problems, she allows him to be her spokesperson in their relationship.

Furthermore, in the couple's communications with systems and people outside of their relationship they communicate more easily through Jandre, given his stronger verbal skills and intellectual abilities. Thus, in these contexts, Belinda allows Jandre to speak for her and be her spokesperson in these contexts as well, to a large degree. This was evident during the interviews, where she often allowed him to elaborate on her answers; or, by maintaining her silence, she often allowed him to answer for her. In turn, Jandre was mostly attuned to her communications by filling in her silences or sometimes clarifying some of her answers. On a couple of occasions he also whispered words to her while she was talking, and she reciprocated by using those words.

In addition to the above mentioned usual roles in this communication pattern, there also appears to be enough flexibility for Belinda to speak for herself where and when required, or if she feels comfortable doing so. This was also evident during the interviews when Belinda would often provide important additional information that Jandre could not provide, or when she corrected him. She furthermore often made pertinent comments about her experiences and behaviours, their relationship, the rape, subsequent stressors and her perception of Jandre's experiences and behaviours in a very direct and straightforward manner. Before the rape, this flexibility, and her speaking up in this way, had not constituted part of their communication pattern. Rather, it seems to have evolved out of the chaos of the rape and its aftermath.

From the above it is clear that Jandre fulfills the role of spokesperson for the couple, whereas Belinda's role is that of complementing his, adding the finer nuances to their communications as a couple. Metaphorically speaking, Jandre provides the couple's voice and Belinda provides the tone for their voice.

5.3 BACKGROUND

5.3.1 Personal

Belinda is 29 years old and the oldest child in a family of three children. She has two brothers who are respectively 26 and 23 years old. Belinda is the only one in the family who is intellectually handicapped. During the genogram discussions, her childhood years were described as difficult, unstable and chaotic and were characterised by the alcohol abuse evident in both her parents, physical violence between her parents, and also her father's violence towards all three of the children. Belinda's highest qualification is standard 6 which she obtained in a school for intellectually challenged children. Her parents took her out of the school during her standard 7 year, following a foot injury. Belinda was never re-enrolled in school. At the time of the rape she worked at a company that provides sheltered employment for the intellectually challenged. Following the birth of the couple's first child, Ame, Belinda resigned and is now a stay-at-home mother.

Jandre is 32 years old. He has a younger brother who is 31 years old. Jandre described himself as a child conceived through rape. His maternal grandparents raised him as their own child for many years. He grew up believing that he was the youngest child in a family of six children, and that his biological mother, aunts and uncles were his brothers and sisters. He reported that his life was fairly stable until the age of nine years when his grandmother (whom he still believed to be his mother at the time) died. Following the death of his grandmother, his life, stability and the image put forward by the family slowly started to unravel. He became increasingly aware of differences in how his grandfather treated, and interacted with him and his supposed brothers and sisters. When he was thirteen years old, part of the family secret was exposed, and he found out that his sister was actually his mother. His high school years were especially unstable in that he moved around from one family member to the next and never really had a place he could call home. Despite all this instability and upheaval, he managed to obtain his matric. The full extent of the secret, in other words that he was a child of rape, was only exposed years later. Jandre worked in many capacities over the years, which included employment as a mechanic and also a position at the same company where Belinda was working before Ame was born. At present he is employed as a guillotine operator (paper cutter) at a photo shop.

5.3.2 Their relationship

Belinda and Jandre met in 1998 and started a relationship shortly afterwards. According to Jandre and Belinda, she took the initiative in establishing the first contact between them. At the time the couple did not possess transport and were obliged to rely on Belinda's parents for transport in order to continue seeing one another. Shortly after they began their relationship, Belinda's mother grew tired of driving

them around, and suggested Jandre come and stay with Belinda and her family. Following the couple's increasing dissatisfaction with this living arrangement, they eventually moved out of Belinda's parents' home and started renting the flat owned by Jandre's biological mother. They were still living in this flat when the rape occurred and at the time the interviews were conducted.

From the couple's account, before the rape, they generally experienced their relationship as a relatively well-defined and functional unit since they were able to provide for themselves and to overcome challenges, for example those posed by the difference in their intellectual abilities and verbal skills. However, their functionality as a couple was burdened by Belinda's parents moving into the couple's home and becoming financially dependent on them. This arrangement gradually exposed their vulnerabilities as a couple and it became increasingly difficult for them to maintain their previous levels of functionality. The couple was also quite open about the fact that in the time preceding the rape, this situation contributed to their becoming increasingly dissatisfied with certain aspects of their relationship.

5.3.3 Rape-trauma

The rape occurred in June 2006. At the time, Belinda was on sick leave following an injury on duty. During this time Belinda's parents and one brother were living with the couple in their flat. On the day of the rape, she had arranged to meet Jandre during his lunch break, mostly in an effort to spend quality time together, as a couple, away from her parents. While on her way to Jandre, Belinda was walking in a shopping centre just across the road from the centre where Jandre worked, and fairly close to where the couple lives. She was raped in the parking lot of this shopping centre. The rapist was a man of Eastern descent. Following the rape, Belinda fell pregnant, but there was uncertainty about the unborn baby's paternity. She eventually decided to undergo an abortion. During the first interview and part of the second interview, much of the conversation centered on the abortion as one of the major obstacles the couple faced after the rape. Following the rape and the subsequent abortion, both Belinda and Jandre described a feeling of loss and emptiness, and they decided to start a family of their own. They were married in April 2007 and their daughter was born towards the end of that year.

5.4 THEMES
5.4.1 Connectedness versus disconnectedness

A very prominent theme for this couple was that of connectedness versus disconnectedness. Human systems are organised around patterns of connectedness and disconnectedness, and these patterns are also indicative of the relative closeness or distance in relationships (Pistole, 1994). By considering

Belinda and Jandre's relational patterns in this regard before and after the rape, the reciprocal impact between these patterns and the trauma becomes evident. From a systemic perspective, consideration is accorded not only to patterns of connectedness within the couple, but also between the couple system and other systems. From Belinda and Jandre's account it became evident how their connectedness to one another, and how they dealt with, integrated and survived the rape and its aftermath as a couple, were reciprocally influenced by their system's relative connectedness to other systems.

As discussed in chapter three, the relative closeness or connectedness in a relationship is negotiated between partners and eventually becomes part of their relationship definition. Thus, it forms part of the couple system's rules, but is also simultaneously determined by those rules. Furthermore, once agreed upon and part of the system's rules, it is relatively stable though, like any other system value, it fluctuates within certain parameters. This means that partners are at times closer or more connected to one another, than at other times. Through sharing their experiences of the rape and its aftermath as part of this research process, it was possible to see how Belinda and Jandre struggled in the post-rape context to restabilise the extreme closeness-distance fluctuations in their relationship and to maintain their connectedness to one another within their system's parameters.

As mentioned earlier, Jandre and Belinda exhibit a very specific communication pattern. This pattern evolved out of, and fits with, their particular circumstances. Owing to Belinda's limited intellectual abilities and verbal skills she sometimes has difficulty communicating verbally with those around her, and at times either does not know, or cannot find or pronounce, appropriate words to express what she wants to say. Before the rape, she would often rather keep quiet than engage in conversation. This contributed to her isolation in relationships in general, and in the couple's relationship it sometimes contributed to tension and distance between Belinda and Jandre. Being very aware of her difficulties in this regard, Jandre in the past often approached her when he became aware that something was bothering her.

> *Jandre: ...So, sy praat nie so baie met my nie, maar as ons praat, dan praat ek met haar op so manier dat sy naderhand gemaklik voel om met my te praat en dan praat ons naderhand die ding uit. En dit is hoe ons kommunikeer. En ek kom agter wanneer daar iets fout is. Ek, ek vra vir haar: "Wat is fout?" Sy sê: "Niks nie, ek is net moeg". Dan sê ek vir haar: "Weet jy wat, ek glo jou nie. Jy is nie net moeg nie, daar is nou weer iets fout. So, spoeg dit uit en praat nou en wat wat, dat ons net kan aangaan en weet". En dan naderhand, dan begin sy met my te praat. Ek moet net bietjie aanhou en aanhou en karring en karring, en dan naderhand dan gee sy maar in en dan praat sy met my. Dit is hoe ek dit doen.*

Jandre: ...Maar ander mense het nie, hulle het nie die geduld nie en hulle weet nie hoe om dit te doen nie. Ek weet net hoe. Ek weet net hoe om dit te doen.

Thus, the couple found a way to deal with the particular communication challenges in their relationship and the potential distancing and disconnecting impact of those challenges. From the above it is clear that they take on very specific roles which suit their respective verbal skills and intellectual abilities. Furthermore, as briefly described in the researcher's initial impressions, they also developed a very specific sequence of behaviours in response to unacceptable closeness-distance fluctuations in their relationship. This sequence entails Belinda's increasingly withdrawing by becoming more silent than usual, thereby sending a non-verbal message to Jandre that there may be an issue that needs to be addressed. Jandre, in turn, notices and manoeuvres for greater closeness by approaching Belinda and encouraging or supporting her in finding the words she needs to express herself verbally. Belinda then reciprocates by manoeuvring to increase closeness and opening up to him. In this way, as a couple, they are able to discuss, clarify and deal with problems and issues within and outside of their relationship.

From the above excerpt it is evident that the couple follows meta-communication rules which allow them to comment on the way they are communicating. Jandre commented on how Belinda's verbal message did not correspond with her non-verbal messages. As mentioned in chapter three, meta-communication rules allow for the clarification of incongruent messages and enable partners to avoid potential communication traps and misunderstandings which may contribute to distance or disconnectedness in relationships. In Belinda and Jandre's relationship, faced with unique challenges and limitations in terms of verbal communication, these meta-communication rules provide them with an effective way of working with and around those challenges and limitations. In this regard they possess the means to clarify their understanding of what the other person said and communicated and to compare that with what they have heard.

As is evident from the above, their effective communication is closely intertwined with and enhanced by their being finely attuned to one another. However, despite their attunement to one another and the potential functionality of their communication pattern, these patterns were still recursively impacted on by other dynamics and patterns internal and external to their system. For example, the couple's diffuse external boundaries allowed Belinda's parents and the couple to come too close and become over-involved with one another. In this regard, at the time of the rape, most of Belinda's nuclear family was living with the couple in their home, while her parents were financially dependent on the couple and also interfered in the latter's relationship. This situation contributed to increasing tension, frustration, disagreements and conflicts between Belinda and Jandre.

Jandre: ...Hulle het niks, niks waardeer wat ons vir hulle gedoen het nie. En, met dit het daar wrywing ook tussen my en haar gekom, want ek het elke aand, baie aande het ek vir haar gesê "Ek gee alles wat ek het, al my geld en dan nog steeds behandel jou familie my soos 'freakin' weet nie wat nie". En dit het iets tussen ons, dit het wrywing ook tussen ons veroorsaak. As gevolg van hulle, nie dat ons 'n probleem met mekaar het nie, maar as gevolg van haar familie wat heeltyd 'n probleem met my het. Maar ek sorg vir hulle...

Furthermore, the over-involvement between these two systems and her parent's intrusiveness also limited the amount of private time the couple had to themselves. Given the couple's communication challenges, privacy was vital to ensure their communication remained effective. Under these circumstances, a circular feedback loop developed where their living arrangement contributed to increasing tension, conflict and frustration in their relationship, bringing about distance between them. As the distance between them increased, they became less attuned to one another's needs and communications and therefore communicated less effectively, which in turn contributed to even more tension, conflict and frustration, driving them apart even further. Thus, although the couple's attunement to one another and their communication pattern used to serve them well in the past in terms of remaining close and connected, their living arrangements and outside demands on their system increasingly undermined these patterns.

The above stressful living situation and the impact thereof on the couple system also made for a precariously balanced homeostasis, both within the couple system and between the couple and the larger family system. The rape, and the confusion that followed on the day of and in the week after the rape, finally began to drive these systems towards instability and chaos. In this regard, based on events on the day of the rape, Jandre assumed Belinda had been unfaithful. He furthermore accepted this assumption as correct, without first clarifying the matter with her. Finally, he acted on his assumption, withdrew completely from Belinda and did not speak to her for a week.

Jandre: Ja, ja, dit is nadat dit gebeur het. Dit is nadat dit gebeur het. Ja, en ek het nie geweet waar sy is of "whatever" nie en ewe skielik hier kom sy toe te verskyne op 'n plek waar sy nie moes te verskyne kom nie. Sy't, sy't heeltemal van 'n ander rigting af gekom wat sy moes van aangekom het. En toe dink ek 'Nee, jis, jy's nou besig om my heeltemal hier rondom die bos te lei'. Ek het nie 'n "clue" wat aangaan nie. Dis toe ek gedink het sy het my verneuk. Vir die hele week lank het ons niks vir mekaar gesê nie.

At the same time, Belinda was extremely traumatised and her immediate response to the rape included fear, shock and dissociation, which furthermore amplified the connection difficulties posed by her

limited intellectual abilities and verbal skills. After the rape, she withdrew completely on all levels and from everyone around her.

> *Belinda: ...* (trane in haar oë) *Ek is net bang gewees...ek het nie geweet hoe gaan ek...daaroor...hoe om dit te sê nie.*

Their mutual withdrawal from one another represented a shift from their usual behavioural sequence towards unacceptable closeness-distance fluctuations. As mentioned earlier, usually withdrawal and distance by Belinda are met by complementary manoeuvres to achieve closeness from Jandre. Furthermore, the fact that the couple was becoming increasingly less attuned to one another in the time preceding the rape, also fed into their mutual withdrawal in the post-rape context, since it had the impact that they did not notice, and therefore also did not respond to, the intensity of one another's distress. In this regard, not noticing Belinda's distress, Jandre interpreted her distance and withdrawal as confirmation of her infidelity. For Belinda, Jandre's withdrawal and distance meant she had lost her spokesperson and she no longer possessed the means to inform him or her family of the rape. Furthermore, it also seems she interpreted his withdrawal and distance in a way which led her to believe that she could not trust him.

The difficulties and distance in their relationship in the time preceding the rape are perhaps most clearly illustrated by the above meanings they ascribed to one another's behaviour in the post-rape context. In this regard, both interpreted the other's behaviour in terms of distrust. Furthermore, the fact that Belinda found it difficult to trust anyone immediately after the rape, including Jandre, also seems to suggest that she did not feel close enough to Jandre to turn to him in her time of need.

> *Belinda: ... Dit was moeilik gewees om, uh, enige een te vertrou...*

These pre-existing relational and system patterns of increasing tension and conflict, increasingly ineffective communication, distance and distrust amplified the confusion and trauma surrounding the rape. In a circular manner, the confusion and trauma surrounding the rape also fed into these pre-existing relational and system cycles, eventually culminating in their complete disconnectedness on all levels and the complete breakdown of their once effective communication pattern.

> *Belinda: Het my heeltemal...weet nie hoe om vir my ou te sê wat gebeur het nie...dit was moeilik gewees.*
>
> *Jandre: En ek dink sy was ook bang vir my reaksie. Maar...toe sy sien ek gee ook niks reaksie nie, ek dink toe is dit nog erger vir haar. Want toe ewe skielik praat ek vir 'n hele week lank nie met haar nie...*

Jandre: Dit was 'n deurmekaarspul. Dit was deurmekaar vir ons altwee. Ek meen, ek meen, vir 'n hele week lank, ugh, dit is amper soos ons was van bed en tafel geskei. Ons het in dieselfde bed geslaap, sy't die kant gelê, ek het daai kant gelê. Ons het nie 'n woord vir mekaar gesê nie. Die hele week lank. Ons het nie eers gesê 'hallo' of 'nag', niks.

In the context of their relationship this behaviour was completely different from their usual way of being and interacting with one another, even in times of conflict and increasing distance. In other words, despite the recent increasing distance in their relationship, this complete disconnectedness and change in their communication pattern were not congruent with their system's way of functioning. In this regard, the extent of their disconnectedness and the distance between them exceeded previously negotiated or acceptable closeness-distance levels in their relationship, of which both of them were very aware as well as being upset by. In addition, their "not talking" for a week was a violation of an important system rule in terms of how they dealt with conflict and problems in their relationship.

Jandre: Ons baklei baie min. En as ons baklei is dit oor goed wat ons dieselfde aand nog uit-"sort", of die volgende oggend. Ons het nie 'n bakleierige verhouding nie.

However, despite the fact that their once effective communication pattern broke down, when looking at these events systemically, it becomes possible to recognise that although they were "not talking" to one another, this does not mean that they were not communicating. In keeping with the systemic principle that one cannot not communicate, their behaviour in "not talking" and not clarifying the matter within a day, still possessed immense communicative value in the context of their relationship. Thus, their not discussing what had happened may have disconnected them on a content level; however, on a process level this disconnection communicated a very important message, namely that their relationship was in serious trouble.

Added to the above confusion and disruptions within their relationship, Belinda's parents' interference and intrusiveness during this week also prevented the couple from finding opportunities to privately discuss and clarify their concerns. The differences in how the couple behaved towards and interacted with one another during this week, the incongruence of these differences with their system, the fact that these differences amplified pre-existing tensions and distance in their relationship and Belinda's parents' continued intrusion finally destabilised their system, to such an extent that their survival as a couple was under threat.

Jandre: …ons MOES met mekaar praat.
Navorser: Julle het daai behoefte gehad om alleen saam te wees…
Jandre: Ons MOES, ons MOES. Dit het ons doodgemaak………

Belinda: ...Maar na die tyd, dit was bietjie moeilik gewees. Ons het nie, huh, veel gepraat en goed nie.

This instability and the severity of this threat triggered a negative feedback loop aimed at returning their system to its former status quo. Jandre decided to confront Belinda, while they were travelling by bus to a doctor's appointment for an injury she had sustained at work a few weeks prior to the rape. When he approached her, and with him providing support and encouragement, Belinda revealed she had been raped. In other words, this conversation corrected the symmetrical withdraw-withdraw sequence in the week immediately after the rape and temporarily returned their system to its former more effective withdraw-approach-approach sequence.

Jandre: ...En toe trek ek dit uit haar uit en toe sê ek: 'Nou WAT is fout? Daar is iets. Ek wil nou weet. Ek voel daar is iets baie ernstigs verkeerd en ek weet nie...ek moet nou weet'. En toe vertel sy...

Belinda: Dit was vir my bietjie moeilik om vir hom te vertel. Ek weet nie presies hoe moet ek sê of daaroor te praat en wat gebeur het nie. Dit was bietjie moeilik gewees...

Furthermore, by falling back on their former effective communication pattern they also corrected the deviation from the system rule in terms of how conflict and problems in their relationship are dealt with. The couple discussed the crisis in their relationship and attempted to clarify and deal with the confusion, misinterpretations and silence surrounding the events on the day of the rape in a way which was more congruent with their system. It seems that as the conversation unfolded, Belinda's limited verbal skills initially made it difficult for her to convey exactly to Jandre what had happened. However, as he asked more and more questions, in accordance with their usual communication pattern, she provided more details, and he eventually realised that she had been raped.

Jandre: Vir my was dit ampers eers asof sy my ge-"cheat" het, gmf. Soos, uh, soos sy my vertel het, maar, en toe het ek nou nie te erg daaroor gestres nie.

Jandre: Ja, ja, want sy het net, sy't nie direk gesê sy was verkrag nie. Sy't net gesê, toe sê ek 'Nee, nee'. Toe kom ek actu..., heeltemal ver-, verward gewees. En toe wil ek nou nie verder daaroor stres nie, ek meen en so. En toe het ek, ek het jou net verder aanhou gevra. Ek het jou amper nie kans gegee om te praat nie. En toe't sy my klomp antwoorde gegee en toe kom ek eintlik agter op, dat sy, dat eintlik was sy verkrag. So, toe sê ek 'eintlik was jy dan verkrag gewees'. Sy sê dan 'ja'.

Through this conversation the couple attempted to correct or counter the fluctuation towards extreme disconnectedness and distance in their relationship. However, when it became apparent that Belinda

had been raped, their attempts at restabilising their system and reconnecting were thwarted as the shock of the rape reverberated through their system. The couple was overwhelmed by their individual emotional responses to the rape. In this regard Jandre's response centred on extreme anger, frustration, confusion, and helplessness whereas Belinda was extremely traumatised, sad, fearful and confused.

> *Jandre: Vir my was dit ook asof sy baie verward was…ons was baie verward* (baie emosioneel)………
>
> *Jandre: …Maar daai volgende week was ek "actually" kwaad. Maar ek is nie kwaad vir haar nie, ek was nie kwaad vir die, ek was net kwaad. Ek was nie kwaad vir enige iemand nie… Ek was net kwaad. Ek self was kwaad hier binne.*
>
> *Belinda: …Dit was vir my seer gewees en ek kon met niemand gepraat het nie……*

The severity of the shock, their confusion and the difference in their emotional responses, namely Jandre's extreme anger and frustration and Belinda's extreme sadness and fear, significantly amplified the instability in their system, pushing it into chaos. The communicative value of their respective individual emotional responses conveyed that they both required a great deal of support and care. However, they were simultaneously so confused and overwhelmed by these emotions that their pattern of attunement to one another was completely disrupted. Because their communication pattern was closely intertwined with their attunement to one another's needs and communications, this pattern was also immobilised. The couple could not talk about the rape and also could not recognise and meet one another's needs for support and consolation.

Once again their prominent complementary behavioural sequence altered to a symmetrical sequence of mutual withdrawal. Both Belinda and Jandre withdrew into silence and they attempted to deal with the rape individually, rather than as a couple. In this regard, Belinda was completely passive and withdrawn from everyone around her, whereas Jandre, although also withdrawn, still managed to attend to some basic routine system tasks, such as cooking. Their not being able to talk about the rape, not consoling one another and withdrawing once again escalated the distance and disconnectedness in their relationship beyond its parameters.

> *Jandre: Ek het nie geweet wat om te doen nie…En ek het, ek het, ek kon met niemand daaroor praat nie. Vir die eerste 2 weke het ek met niemand daaroor gepraat nie.*
>
> *Jandre: …Sy't, sy't baie keer net so na my gestaar………en dan… asof sy nie weet wat om vir my te gesê het nie……*

In addition to the internal chaos in their system, the couple also had to contend with their stressful living situation. Not only were Belinda's parents unsupportive during this time, but they continued to

abuse alcohol and expected the couple to continue providing for them, regardless of their crisis. Furthermore, whenever the couple tried to find time alone in order to attempt to discuss the rape, her mother repeatedly interfered. This prevented them from talking about the rape, sharing their experiences and emotions, and ultimately contributed to their difficulties in reconnecting and dealing with the rape as a couple. Because her parents' intrusiveness exacerbated the instability, chaos and distance within the couple's relationship, the couple's connectedness to her parents became just as threatening to the couple's survival as the rape itself.

> *Belinda: Die tyd net na die verkragting het ons nie gepraat nie. Dit het omtrent 'n maand gevat voordat ons ordentlik met mekaar gesels het. Sodra ons wil gesels het, is my familie elke keer …*
> (Jandre begin praat)

It seems that at this point the couple's system was so destabilised and immobilised by their respective individual emotional responses and the incompatibility of these responses, by the incongruence of their mutual withdrawal as well as increasing relational distance and disconnectedness from their system's usual way of functioning, and by the continued intrusion of Belinda's parents, that they could not utilise any of their usual problem solving skills to deal with the rape. This was evident in the fact that they did nothing to counter her parents' continued inappropriate interference and especially evident in the fact that close to three weeks went by after their conversation on the bus, before the couple began seeking outside assistance, or help, from crisis or medical centres.

It seems that the above immobility finally shifted when Belinda and Jandre's emotional experiences became more similar. This was preceded by a physical confrontation between Belinda's father and Jandre on the night he informed her father of the rape. Jandre's explanation for their emotional experiences becoming more alike was that, through this conflict, he had expressed all his anger and frustration and thereafter was left with the sadness and pain that Belinda was experiencing at that stage. A couple of days later he expressed these emotions for the first time, when, while cooking supper, he started to cry. He was so overwhelmed that he did not finish preparing supper.

> *Jandre: Ja, ja, daai, daai eerste 2 weke, na daai 2 weke wat ek so "heavy" kwaad was, het ek, ek het net al my "anger"…Wat, wat, ek meen ek het al my frustrasie "actually" op haar pa uitgehaal en toe, en, en, en na dit was daar ook nog ook nie eers meer frustrasie nie. Daar was nie eers meer eintlik frustrasie nie……*
> *Navorser: Wat was daar?*
> *Jandre: Dit was maar net seer…soos wat dit "actually" met haar toe was. En toe is dit met my en toe raak ons dieselfde…seer en gebreek……*

It is possible that the shift in Jandre's emotional response from extreme anger to sadness presented yet another threat to their system. As mentioned above, up and until this point, Jandre still managed to attend to certain basic system functions. However, when his anger also turned to sadness, he struggled to continue fulfilling these. Thus, it seems that these events, namely the physical confrontation and Jandre's "breakdown", fed into each other, setting in motion a positive feedback loop which drove their system even further into chaos. However, from this chaos emerged a different connection for the couple, a connection that defied verbal expression. Furthermore, this chaos, and their new connectedness, appeared to have driven their system into action. They recognised one another's distress and began to mobilise by approaching outside systems for assistance.

> *Jandre: Dis eers frustrasie wat by, by my moes uitkom en, en toe't ek soos sy begin seer word en goed. En, en ek dink dit is eers 2 weke daarna wat ons rêrig gaan hulp soek het. Wat ons met mense gaan praat en goed het.*

Through their connection with these outside systems information fed back into their system in terms of how to communicate about the rape. They started talking to one another, sharing their experiences, providing support and consoling one another: in other words, they started dealing with the rape as a couple. As the extreme fluctuations in terms of distance and disconnectedness were corrected through their conversations and mutual support, their system slowly began to stabilise and they became more effective as a couple. Thus, the new connection that emerged from the above chaos was maintained and amplified by their connectedness with outside systems.

> *Jandre: Ja, ek sou meer sê dit is nadat ons actually met mense begin praat het en goed… Ons het toe nog na die eerste krisissentrum toe gegaan en ons het na, uhm, huh, die provinsiale hospitaal se krisissentrum toe gegaan. Dit is, ek meen, ons het met mense daar gaan praat, en, en, en dis toe ons ook met mekaar begin praat het, dinge kan uitsorteer…*

However, as this process was unfolding, Belinda started becoming physically ill. The couple began to suspect that she might be pregnant and carried out a home pregnancy test. The result of the test was positive. As the possibility of a pregnancy emerged, the couple realised that there was also a very strong possibility that Belinda could be pregnant with the rapist's child. This positive test result and the possibility that Belinda was pregnant with the rapist's child once again sent their system into chaos. The possibility of a pregnancy, the related paternity concerns and the renewed chaos, prompted the couple to immediately seek medical attention. They travelled by bus to a community clinic, expecting the clinic to conduct a more accurate blood pregnancy test. However, the clinic also conducted a urine pregnancy test. When this result was also positive, the couple was so shocked and overwhelmed that they were completely cut off from everything around them. Once again their verbal communication

broke down and they could not talk to one another or to other people. In this crisis, though, they seemed to fall back on their newly emerged deeper connectedness, and provided one another with support and consolation without the use of, or need for, words.

> *Jandre: Ons was "lost", ons was rêrig "lost". Ek meen, ons het verby iets soos 10 bus stoppe geloop…Asof ons nie…ons het nie eers "sense" gehad, ons het geweet in watter rigting ons in loop, ons het geweet ons loop huis toe. Ons het nie geweet…maar, maar hoekom het ons nog nie gestop vir 'n bus nie. Ek meen, die buste ry verby ons. Hulle ry verby ons. En ons het die geld in ons sak om terug te ry huis toe…*
>
> *Jandre: Te loop. Dis al wat ons gedoen het. En ons het "actually", ons het "actually" toe, ons het so teen mekaar geloop, dat ons nie nou nog mekaar ook nog verloor nie.*
>
> *Jandre: Ons het "totally", ons het, ons was stil…*

From the above it is clear that the confirmation of the pregnancy re-traumatised the couple and that both Belinda and Jandre were presenting with dissociative-type stress reactions (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In shock and overwhelmed, the couple just walked home, passing numerous bus stops on their way, despite the fact that they had enough money to use the bus. Once they arrived home, Jandre managed to phone his brother and informed him of the pregnancy. His brother took them to a private hospital later the same day where a blood pregnancy test and, for the first time since the rape, an HIV-test were done. This blood test was the final confirmation that Belinda was pregnant. This confirmation pushed their system into extreme chaos, as concerns about the unborn child's paternity became prominent.

As mentioned above, there was a very strong possibility that Belinda was pregnant with the rapist's child. However, the couple also realised that Jandre might be the father of the unborn child. The uncertainty about the child's paternity completely derailed the couple's restabilisation process. In this regard, the possibility that Belinda was pregnant with the rapist's child resonated strongly with Jandre's life story and reality as a child of rape himself. Thus, the pregnancy created a context where Belinda's reality as a rape victim and the mother of an unwanted, and in all likelihood the rapist's child, was very different from Jandre's reality as possibly the biological father of an unexpected child, or the willing surrogate father to the rapist's child. Their very different and opposing realities exacerbated the chaos around this new and extreme stressor and complicated their efforts to deal with the pregnancy as a couple.

The disruptive and distancing impact of their different realities on their relationship slowly became evident as the crisis of the pregnancy unfolded. Initially they attempted to deal with the pregnancy as a couple and tried to make a joint decision. However, the extreme chaos within their system was evident

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in their haphazardly approaching various people and institutions, such as crisis centres, the church and family members, for advice in terms of whether or not to terminate the pregnancy. They received conflicting advice, such as suggestions that they carry out the abortion, while others, and especially the church, pointed out alternative options available to the couple. Rather than stabilising their system, all this information entering their system confused Belinda and Jandre even more, thereby amplifying their system's internal chaos.

> *Jandre: ...En ons was altwee verward. Soos in, soos in die familie, die kerk, en die krisis "centre" het ons, het ek, het my verward gemaak. Ek dink dit het haar net so verward gemaak. Vir my was dit baie verwarrend……*

Furthermore, as the couple attempted to deal with the crisis and make a final decision about the abortion, it became evident that the above conflicting advice resonated with and amplified the differences in their individual realities and also reinforced Jandre's ambivalence about the abortion. Although the couple initially agreed that they were proceeding with the abortion, Jandre subsequently changed his mind and attempted to persuade Belinda not to do so. With Jandre changing his mind, the incompatibility of their respective realities and experiences made it impossible for them to continue functioning as a couple. As the crisis deepened and their respective realities became more prominent, they both again became focused on their own needs and could no longer maintain their attunement to one another's needs. Once again the key process of their being attuned to one another was disrupted. This, in turn, impacted on their relationship in terms of the understanding, support and care with which they could provide one another during this crisis. As the crisis intensified and a final decision had to be taken, their individual realities, and their not being attuned to one another, again amplified the distance between them and eventually discussions around the abortion broke down. Belinda decided to go ahead with the abortion, despite Jandre's objections.

> *Jandre: ...Sy het naderhand, as ek my mond oopmaak, het sy gesê: "Ek weet wat gaan jy sê. Bly net stil". Dis wat sy, toe ons daai oggend op die bus klim, op pad dorp toe, toe sê sy "Ek weet wat gaan jy sê. Bly net stil"………Toe bly ek maar stil.*

Belinda's decision to proceed with the abortion nevertheless, and the above fluctuation towards extreme distance, furthermore added to the chaos in their system. However, amidst this chaos, the couple's new pattern of dealing with overwhelming and threatening internal turmoil by becoming mobile, and approaching and connecting with helpful external systems, eventually brought them back into contact with the church. Their connectedness to the church seemed to be especially pivotal in terms of restabilising their system after the abortion. Although the church did not condone the abortion, the couple was provided with valuable information in terms of how to discuss and begin dealing with

the impact of the abortion on their relationship. Furthermore, the church respected Belinda's choice to undergo the abortion and worked with them as a couple in a way which legitimised and connected their individual opposing realities. For the couple this brought about understanding and acceptance of one another's reality and experience, which in turn brought them closer as a couple.

As they grew closer, the couple also became more effective in other ways. Shortly before her parents moved out of the couple's home, they began addressing and dealing with her parents' intrusiveness by creating opportunities for talking about their ordeal at places and at times when they knew they would not be interrupted. Thus, their connectedness with the church and also their reconnection with one another enabled them to begin to distance and protect their system from harmful interference by other individuals and systems.

> Jandre: ...eintlik wil ons baie, baie met mekaar gepraat het, maar ook omrede haar ma-hulle altyd gedrink was en altyd hier was. Ons het nooit rêrig eers kans gekry om rêrig met mekaar eers daaroor te praat nie en REGTIG. Die enigste plek wat ons regtig met mekaar toe kommunikeer was by die kerk.
>
> Jandre: ...Ons het, baie mense het ons partykeer "lifts" gegee tot by die kerk. Maar baie keer het ons besluit ons loop maar. Want, weet jy hoekom? Dis al wanneer ons rêrig tyd gekry het om met mekaar te praat. Ons het baie keer vroeër kerk toe gegaan, en onder die bome gesit en met mekaar gepraat.

During the interviews it became apparent that as the couple dealt with the ordeal of the rape, pregnancy and abortion, they also reconnected by attempting to make sense of and find meaning in how they handled the ordeal as a couple and what it meant for their relationship in the long term. It seems that in this regard they were very aware of and reflected on the fact that, when the rape occurred, their relationship was characterised by a cycle of increasing distance contributed to by patterns and processes within and outside of their relationship. They also indicated that the ordeal they had been through could have potentially destroyed their relationship. However, they felt that despite the threat, chaos and horror of the rape and its aftermath, it also reconnected them and brought them closer together as a couple. For them the impact on their relationship and their increased closeness and connectedness are illustrated by the fact that they are now even more attuned to one another than ever before, by the mutual respect they now have for one another, by the fact that they understand one another better and that they talk more and communicate more effectively.

> Jandre: Dit voel asof ons mekaar beter respekteer en asof ons deesdae ook makliker kominukeer ek voel asof ons nader aan mekaar gegroei het...
>
> Belinda: Ons praat meer met mekaar en goed.

Jandre: Ons verstaan mekaar beter.

Jandre: Dit gaan ook oor hoe ons voel, ons, ons weet wat die ander een partykeer dink.

Despite the changes, gains and growths they experienced relationally, the couple also reflected on the fact that in the months after the rape, pregnancy and abortion they still struggled with feelings of severe loss. They related this loss to a loss of meaning or "sense" in living, which is a common experience in trauma survivors (Fetchenhauer et al., 2005). In addition both of them also connected the loss with the abortion and what each of them had lost as a result of the abortion. Belinda described the loss more concretely in terms of the emptiness she experienced following the abortion, whereas Jandre described the loss in terms of not becoming a father and also the loss of a child that presented him. Although the couple had great difficulty in terms of remaining connected and close while they struggled to deal with the rape and abortion, it seems that the loss they experienced individually, after these events, contributed to bringing them closer as a couple. Ultimately their experience of loss and their attempts to understand, adjust to and deal with this loss, connected them in a new way by focusing their system's energies away from the events and towards the future by deciding to start a family of their own.

Jandre: ...na die aborsie, daar het 'n leemte in ons gekom. Daar is regtig 'n leemte in ons gewees, daar was net 'n leemte. 'n Leemte wat nie een van ons kon verduidelik, ons kon nie daai leemte verduidelik nie. Ons, ons het toe baie met mekaar gepraat. Ek meen, dit was toe nou al 2 maande daarna. Dit was toe al maklik om daaroor te praat. Ons het die kerk "support" gehad en selgroep "support" en alles...Daar was net 'n leemte......Desember was die vensterperiode oor, toe het ons weer daaroor gepraat. Toe besluit ons ons gaan maar ons eie familie begin (baie sag)*. Probeer kyk of die leemte gaan toegaan dan. En dit het toe gewerk, want die leemte het toe gegaan.*

Belinda: (onduidelik) *Ja, daar was 'n leemte voor ons haar gekry het......haar gekry om daai vol te maak.*

During the interviews it also became apparent that for Belinda and Jandre, dealing with the rape, pregnancy and abortion, is an ongoing process and that this has not all taken the form of gains and growth. They were open about and also reflected on the fact that they still sometimes struggle with the sporadic distancing and disconnecting impact of the rape and abortion on their relationship. In this regard, the impact of the rape is perhaps most immediately evident in the changes to the couple's sexual intimacy and closeness. In this regard the couple now has less frequent sexual intercourse, and both lost interest in sex to some extent. Both Jandre and Belinda also commented on the fact that she

now dresses differently following the rape. From their descriptions it appears that she now dresses in ways which hide or cover up her sexuality.

> *Belinda: Gewoonlik voor dit het ek mooi aangetrek. Nou trek ek langbroeke aan en gewone "panties" en goed. Dit het my heeltemal "down" gevoel en ek het ongelukkig daaroor gevoel, dit het my heeltemal verander.*

> *Jandre: Ons sekslewe was nooit weer dieselfde na die verkragting nie. Ons is nou minder seksueel aktief as voorheen, dit is asof ons (veral Belinda) belangstelling in seks verloor het. Alhoewel ons respekteer mekaar se gevoelens, sy en ek weet dat ons ook die seks lewe aan die gang moet hou.*

The above changes have the potential to sporadically disconnect the couple on a sexually and physically intimate level. However, they are aware of the impact of the rape on this area of their relationship and they attempt to deal with these changes by a combination of old and new system rules. One of their pre-rape system rules was that, as a couple, they did not fight over sex, while in terms of their new system rule they hold a deeper respect for one another, also in terms of their respective sexual needs and desires. Both furthermore acknowledge the importance of maintaining their sexual intimacy and closeness as part of their overall connectedness to one another. It seems that by adhering to their system rules and by discussing and being open about the importance of the sexual aspect of their relationship, they are able to deal with and limit the potential disconnecting impact of these changes. However, despite their coping skills and mechanisms in this regard, it is clear that as a couple they experience a significant loss as a result of these changes and that both of them are saddened and frustrated by this.

At this point, though, it seems the question of the aborted child's paternity, perhaps more than the rape or abortion itself, still occasionally destabilises the couple system, contributing to sporadic distance between Jandre and Belinda and, at times, even threatens their relationship. This seems to occur mostly when the issue of rape or abortion comes up on television, for example, or when it is raised in conversation, as was the case with their participation in this research. In this regard, Jandre expresses a need to obtain the results of the DNA-testing and finally clarify the paternity issue. However, Belinda maintains the position that she does not want to know, that she did the right thing for herself and for the child and that she wants to put the ordeal behind them and move on. The distancing and potential destructive impact of this unresolved issue was evident during the interviews, since Jandre at times came across as blaming and resenting Belinda. Belinda, although clearly upset and hurt by his comments, maintained her position while simultaneously acknowledging his, without becoming defensive, manoeuvring for distance, resenting or blaming him. By her calm and sensitive approach she

also appears to be able to calm him down, and move the couple back to the position where they can appreciate one another's perspectives. Although the issue is likely to never be resolved, unless the DNA-results are revealed, it seems that Belinda's approach is healthier and more conducive to their system's stability and their survival as a couple.

5.4.2 Enmeshment versus differentiation

Another prominent theme for this couple is that of enmeshment versus differentiation. Enmeshment and differentiation tie in closely with the previous theme of connectedness and disconnectedness because these aspects also give an indication of the relative separateness of systems from one another. More specifically, these aspects illuminate the nature of boundaries, and offer an indication of the appropriateness or effectiveness of boundaries, between individuals and within and between systems (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). In the context of trauma the extent to which a system's boundaries screen out threatening or destabilising information, and allow helpful information to enter the system, is especially important for system survival. For Belinda and Jandre, the rape brought the ineffectiveness and inappropriateness of their individual and system boundaries and differentiation processes sharply into focus.

Differentiation is a fundamental process in family systems (Bowen, 1985). For individuals to differentiate from their families of origin, the family system has to develop rules that allow for, adjust to and accept changes in its individual members as they mature towards adulthood. These rules, and the extent to which they exist in a family, allow individuals increasing independence, responsibilities and freedom as they move through developmental phases (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). It can happen, though, that a family functions in such a way that differentiation of one, or all of its members, is denied, complicated, frustrated or blocked. In other words, families may evolve certain rules, patterns, behaviours or realities that interfere with their members' differentiation. In addition a person may also be limited in terms of his or her ability or potential to differentiate from the family of origin, for example due to severe physical or intellectual disability. Thus, individuals differentiate to varying degrees from their families of origin, depending on the interaction between the family and individual's way of functioning, the individual's position and role in the family and the family's rules in terms of differentiation. According to Bowen (1985) a differentiated individual is someone who can be close to his or her family members, while at the same time maintaining one's own self as separate.

Before the rape occurred, Belinda was still very much undifferentiated from her parents, in comparison with her brothers. This is evidenced by the fact that she experienced difficulty in being emotionally

close to them, while maintaining her own self as separate from them. Before the rape, she used to become extremely upset by their actions, behaviours and criticisms of her.

> *Jandre: ...voor dit het Belinda elke liewe lelike, vieslike "message" het Belinda haar aan alles gesteur.*

> *Jandre: ...haar ma kan haar broers vloek, nê. En haar broers sê net "aaggh, 'whatever'". Nou-nou dan "joke" hulle met hulle ma...Asof die "criticism" net so...Dit raak hulle nie eers nie. Maar vir Belinda was dit altyd so emosioneel. As iemand haar vloek of slegsê, woep woep, in die hart in.*

Belinda's parents furthermore did not adequately acknowledge her movement through the developmental phases or her status as a young, but mature adult. At that point Belinda had moved out of her parents' house, earned an income of her own, was in a long term intimate adult relationship with Jandre; as a couple they provided housing for most of her nuclear family and also supported her parents financially. All these actions clearly demonstrated her ability to function independently of her parents and make her own choices, despite her intellectual limitations. However her parents, and especially her mother, disregarded these accomplishments and still saw her, regarded her and treated her like a baby.

> *Jandre: ...want haar ma sê altyd vir Belinda: "Dis my 'baby', en wat" en ek moet altyd sê: "Belinda is nie meer jou 'baby' nie, sy's 'n GROOTMENS"...*

The implication of the above message is that Belinda cannot take care of herself and still requires her parents', or at least her mother's, presence in her life. By infantilising Belinda, her parents also complicated and prevented her efforts to differentiate. In addition, by denying her attempts at differentiation her parents could maintain their inappropriate over-involvement in her life. Furthermore, sending demeaning messages, criticising and infantilising her also shows profound disrespect for Belinda. Being undifferentiated from her parents, she did not and could not stand up for herself. Standing up for herself would have required her to be close to her parents, but at the same time to make evident to them her separateness, by commenting on or confronting them about how they were treating her: in other words, manoeuvring for a different kind of relationship with them where she was acknowledged as an adult. However, she responded to their disrespectful, infantilising and demeaning behaviour in a helpless, almost child-like manner by accepting their definition of the relationship and keeping quiet, or becoming upset, withdrawing or crying. Her behaviour served to maintain the perception of her as a baby and therefore also her undifferentiated relationship with her parents. Since she did not come to her own defence, Jandre often stood up for her in an effort to protect or shield her from her parents. However, his rescuing her in all likelihood confirmed to her parents that she could not take care of herself and thereby maintained her undifferentiated position in her relationship with her

parents. Furthermore, it also placed her in a similar undifferentiated position in her relationship with Jandre.

Her parents' disrespect towards her was especially evident in their general disregard for her relationship with Jandre and his involvement in her life. This is reflected in the fact that they had, in the past, blatantly interfered in the couple's relationship in various ways, such as by insisting that Belinda handled the couple's finances, and then convincing her to use the couple's very limited income to buy alcohol and cigarettes for themselves. Also, despite all attempts by the couple to assist her parents in sorting out their lives, her parents continued to behave towards and treat the couple, and especially Jandre, in a demeaning and ungrateful manner.

Given her undifferentiated position in her relationship with her parents, Belinda could not and did not stand up for, or shield, Jandre, or their relationship, from her parents' disrespectful behaviour, comments or interference. This contributed to tension and conflict in the couple's relationship which seemed to centre on issues of lack of mutual protection and concerns about loyalty to one another and to their relationship. Furthermore, for Jandre, it also raised concerns about the meaning and value Belinda attached to their relationship and ultimately to him. Thus, it would seem that Belinda's undifferentiated relationship with her parents, at that stage, impacted on the couple's relationship by bringing about increasing distance, distrust and conflict and also bringing about an imbalance in terms of the flow of protection between them.

> *Belinda: Voorheen was ekke baie stil gewees. Ek het nie eers baie gepraat nie, met, met niemand nie. Ek het nie eers partykeer met my ma-hulle baklei of niks nie. Jandre het die meeste praat werk en goed gedoen, na…* (Jandre begin praat)
>
> *Jandre: ...sy't nie baie opgekom nie, verstaan. E, ek het letterlik ons altwee se "battles" ge-"fight" met almal. En dit het daai tyd vir my gevoel of Belinda nie rêrig belangstel om terug te "fight" nie. Ek het moeg geraak om al die "battles" te doen. En juis daarom het, het ek partykeer met haar ook bietjie vasgesit en sê: "Dit werk nie so nie. Ek kan nie als doen nie".*

Not only was Belinda undifferentiated from her parents, but before the rape the boundaries between the couple system and other systems, and especially between the couple and Belinda's parents, were poorly defined and diffuse. This meant over-involvement between these two systems. Furthermore, this over-involvement was mutually maintained by both systems in that the couple was just as over-involved in the functioning of Belinda's parents' relationship, as her parents were in the functioning of the couple's relationship. This may be observed from her parents' interference with the couple's finances and conflicts and the fact that the couple expended most of their system's resources and energy on solving

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her parents' problems. Due to these diffuse boundaries the couple did not balance the flow of resources and energy towards her parents' system with their own system's requirements in this regard. The impact on their relationship was that they increasingly neglected to attend to or resolve their own relational problems, while they also did not invest sufficient time, energy or effort with one another or in their relationship. Thus, the couple system became depleted to such an extent that instead of growing towards greater variety and creativity, their system stagnated. In addition, the enmeshed relationship between these two systems furthermore complicated and prevented Belinda's differentiation from her parents.

> *Jandre: Ja. En ook, die probleme voor die tyd wat, ons het nooit rêrig moeite met mekaar gemaak nie. Ons was wel soos ou "furniture" met mekaar gewees. Ek meen, ons het te gewoond geraak aan mekaar.*
>
> *Jandre: ...Ons het haar ma se probleme uitge-"sort", ons het haar pa se probleme uitge-"sort", het haar broer se probleme uitge-"sort". Ek meen, ons het al ons geld ingesit om ander mense se probleme uit te "sort", wat ons, wat dit nie altyd waardeer het nie. Ek meen, ons het nie na onsself gekyk nie, ons het na ander mense gekyk. Ons het ander mense se dinge uitge-"sort". Ons het nie ons eie probleme uitge-"sort" nie.*

In other words, the couple system was strained and its homeostasis increasingly eroded by the living situation, external demands and lack of attention to their relationship. In addition to the internal tension within the couple's system, it is clear from the above discussion that the homeostasis of the larger family system, containing both the couple and Belinda's parents' systems, was precariously balanced. With the occurrence of the rape, this precarious balance evolved into a rapidly escalating instability which eventually erupted into chaos.

In this regard, as discussed in the previous theme, the rape impacted on the couple's internal dynamics by amplifying their relational distance, eventually leading to disconnectedness and emphasising their opposing individual realities. This disrupted their system's already compromised homeostasis, thereby severely threatening its identity and survival. For the couple system to have restabilised and adequately dealt with these threats, any additional threatening or destabilising information coming into their system had to be warded off. This means their system's diffuse boundaries were required to become clearer and more functional so that these could move towards impermeability and protect their system against any additional destabilising threats. In order to resolve the crisis in their relationship and restabilise and protect their system, the couple attempted to isolate and distance themselves from the extended family members living in the house.

However, although stabilising and protective on the level of their system, the couple's distancing and isolating behaviour, in other words their system's changing boundaries, disturbed and threatened the status quo in terms of over-involvement within the larger enmeshed family system. A more-of-the-same cycle of negative feedback loops was set in motion in order to restore the status quo and stability in the larger system. The more the couple manoeuvred for distance and separateness (a change), the more Belinda's mother manoeuvred for over-involvement (no-change) by intruding on the couple's private conversations and preventing them from having time alone. In a context destabilised by the occurrence of the rape, this amplified intrusiveness, together with the couple's diffuse boundaries not effectively screening out the intrusion, became additional threats to the couple system. In this regard these added to the couple system's instability in the post-rape context, complicating their efforts to adequately deal with rape and the crisis in their relationship.

> *Jandre: Ja, want ons kon nie eers by die swembad gaan sit nie. Want as ons by die swembad gaan sit, dan kom haar ma, dan dink haar ma daar is iets fout. Ons skinder van hulle. Maar dit is nie dit nie, ons het, ons MOES met mekaar praat.*

In addition to the above, for two weeks the couple, Belinda's mother and the rest of her nuclear family kept the rape secret from her father. Belinda feared that he would react violently if he were to be informed about the rape. Jandre indicated that they also waited for the appropriate time to tell him, meaning a time when he was not under the influence of alcohol. The presence of the secret just added to the pre-existing tensions and destabilised the already precarious balance within the larger enmeshed family system. In this regard, everyone who knew about the rape was on edge and disagreed about who should take the responsibility of informing Belinda's father, when he should be informed and about what might happen when he found out. Furthermore, during a time when the couple needed to focus on one another, on their system's requirements in terms of protection and stability, and on how they could deal with the trauma as a unit, their usual pattern of attending to the larger system's crisis once again took precedence over attending to themselves, their crisis and their relationship.

Jandre eventually revealed to Belinda's father that she had been raped. Her father reacted by searching for her, while she hid in her room with her mother. He also blamed Jandre for the rape and accused him of being unable to protect his daughter. This reaction finally threw the entire larger family system into chaos and a physical conflict ensued between Jandre and Belinda's father, where Jandre was the aggressor.

> *Jandre: ...Maar, jis, dit is, dit is, dis, dit was amper soos asof hy 'n, uhm, "poking stick" daar gebruik het, soos, soos hierdie goed wat jy die vuur mee oopkrap. 'n Warm "poking stick" vat en binne in my hart in druk, want, want my hart is nou oop en stukkend, en hy druk dit daar in*

en hy wriemel dit daar binnekant. En, jis, dit was net…en ek het, en sy, en my kop het mal gegaan en ek het amper die ou toppie vermoor daai aand. Regtig. Ek het sy hele gesig ge-"re-arrange", sy neus is nou nog skeef. Ek het hom verwurg…dit is asof ek heeltemal "blank" was…ja…

Jandre: … ek sê vir hom: "Luister, jy…", kyk, ek het meer gevloek……het basies vir hom gesê: "Ek sal jou MORSdood maak, ou toppie. Verstaan jy my?" En ek sê: "Verstaan jy my?! Ek hoor niks nie!" En haar broer sê vir my hy moes my afruk van sy pa af, want anders het ek sy pa doodgemaak…Maar hy kon my nie antwoord nie, want daar was nie meer lug in hom oor nie…

When Jandre's aggressive behaviour is viewed individually and only in relation to the rape, it can be interpreted in a number of more pathologising ways, such as that Jandre was displacing his anger towards the rapist onto Belinda's father, or even his anger against Belinda onto her father. However, when looked at through a systemic lens, seeing the above aggression and conflict in the relational context and appreciating its interpersonal significance and impact, it offers up other less pathologising interpretations.

From this perspective it is clear that Belinda's father had attacked Jandre's position and role in the couple's relationship as Belinda and their relationship's protector. As was evident from the previous excerpts, this was one of his major roles and functions in their relationship and this attack thus also became an attack on the fundamental workings of the couple's relationship. Furthermore, it occurred amidst the fact that the rape had already seriously threatened Jandre's role and position as Belinda's protector. Punctuating from this position, Jandre's aggressive behaviour was coherent with and served to re-establish his position and role as protector in the couple system. He protected not only Belinda and himself from her father's aggression, but also protected their relationship from the additional destabilising and threatening impact of her parents' disrespect and intrusiveness in the post-rape context.

On the level of the larger family system, this conflict not only epitomised the pattern of over-involvement and disrespect between these two systems, but also exceeded the larger system's parameters of what is acceptable in this regard. It is also possible that the larger family system was at this point excessively destabilised and could not make the usual adjustments or corrections to this fluctuation, thereby not preventing its escalation into chaos and violence. However, this chaos was necessary for the couple system's survival, because it also served as a point of bifurcation where the couple system separated from the enmeshed family system (Ward, 1995). Thus, this chaos pushed the

couple system into mobility and following this abrupt separation, the couple system's boundaries temporarily became almost impermeable to interference from Belinda's parents. Furthermore, the changed boundary and separation between these systems were also evident in the fact that her parents kept their distance from the couple in the weeks after the conflict, moved out of the couple's house approximately one month later and have not returned.

The chaotic post-rape context and the above change set in motion a positive feedback loop in terms of the couple's boundary processes and their system's differentiation from the larger family system. In this regard, the rape forced their system's boundaries to become closed to threatening and destabilising information. However, as the rape-trauma unfolded, to include an unwanted pregnancy and subsequent abortion as well, the instability of their system was once again amplified. Although the couple system's boundaries could at this point effectively screen out blatantly threatening information, it seems that, following the confirmation of the pregnancy, the couple initially experienced difficulty in finding an appropriate degree of openness to helpful information. As was discussed in the previous theme, when the couple attempted to deal with the pregnancy and make a decision about the abortion, they allowed too much information and advice to enter into their system, which amplified their system's instability at that point. Through this process the couple experienced that some information, although seemingly helpful, was not necessarily congruent with their individual or system values and therefore still carried the potential to destabile or even threaten their system. Thus, through dealing with the pregnancy and abortion, their system's boundaries were forced to find a flexible balance between permeability and impermeability, based on the congruence of information with their system's values and not on the seemingly helpful nature of the information.

> *Jandre: Dit is presies, presies net daar wat, alles, ons het die "support" nodig gehad, en ons het deure oopgelos vir mense wat wil "support" kom gee. Maar as dit negatiewe goed was, phew, het die deur toegegaan. So, dis waar die grens was. Die grens was oop, dit is soos, huh, Zimbabwe, Mosambiek en Suid-Afrika met hulle Kruger Nasionale Park, die diere kan deurgaan, maar die "illegal immigrants" mag nie deur kom nie. Woep, die deur gaan toe. Gesluit.*
>
> *Jandre: Dan het die deure toegesluit...En, net ek en sy was binne in daai grens. Niemand anderste was daarin nie. En as jy kon, as jy wil kom help het, kon jy maar ingekom het. As jy, as jy net wil kom "warrah, wat, wat", phew, die deur is toe. Bly daai kant.*

In other words, as is evident from Jandre's description the couple's boundaries became clear, but appropriately permeable. Their system was transformed into a functional open system which could adequately protect itself depending on the context, their system's requirements and the congruence

between the information coming into their system and their system's values. Furthermore, the above positive feedback cycle was maintained as information about the appropriateness and effectiveness of these boundary changes was fed back into their system. For example, the couple discovered that their openness to some institutions (or systems), such as the church, was helpful in terms of reducing the chaos in their relationship by providing them with the necessary information and support to deal with and move on from the rape and its aftermath. On the other hand, they experienced that closing their system's boundaries to certain systems, such as Belinda's parents, was equally beneficial to their relationship. They also reached a point where they realised that their openness to the crisis centres was no longer adequate in terms of what they required from those systems. At this point the couple required more spiritual input, which was not offered by these centres. They subsequently adjusted their system's boundaries by withdrawing from these centres and became more open to input from the church. This input in turn contributed to the restabilisation of their system.

Furthermore, since the rape and subsequent pregnancy and abortion, Belinda's parents have only made occasional day visits and continue to be financially independent of the couple. This seems to indicate that the changes in the couple system, and also the changes in the larger family system, were acknowledged, adjusted to and accepted by all the systems and members involved, thereby maintaining the above positive feedback loop.

The process of differentiation also unfolded on an individual level as Belinda increasingly differentiated from Jandre. A critical event in this regard was her decision to terminate the pregnancy, despite Jandre's objections. Up and until this point in the couple's relationship, Jandre used to exclusively occupy the dominant position, making all the decisions for the couple. However, as a rape victim possibly pregnant with the rapist's child, this was the one context in which Belinda was forced into the dominant and decision-making position, regardless of their usual positions or roles in their relationship. Furthermore, it was also the one context in which the initial irreconcilability of their opposing individual realities, as rape victim and child of rape, made it impossible for Jandre to continue being Belinda's unconditional protector. Given the fact that Jandre was a child of rape himself, and also given the possibility that he might have been the unborn child's biological father, he was more protective of the unborn child, and ultimately of his identification with this child, than he was of Belinda and he placed immense pressure on her not to carry out the abortion. Thus, the homeostasis in their relationship in terms of the dominant position, as well as their respective roles as protector and protectee, were severely disturbed by the decision to proceed with the abortion.

From the above it is clear that the rape and subsequent decision forced Belinda out of the submissive role and into a position where she was required to make important decisions. She was also forced into a situation where she could no longer rely on Jandre for protection. She had to ultimately take responsibility for her own protection by standing up for herself and making a decision that was in her best interest, despite his objections and pleas. In addition to the above, Belinda's deciding to proceed with abortion, and Jandre's decision to stand by her regardless of his objections and resentment, provided a unique and corrective experience for Belinda where she was close to and respected by someone, while simultaneously being her own separate person. This experience was furthermore amplified by the fact that the couple's relationship not only withstood this crisis, but also became stronger and more secure afterwards. In this regard these experiences, and the fact that she was able to deal with the crisis situation successfully, seemed to set in motion a positive feedback loop in terms of Belinda's differentiation from Jandre. Following the ordeal, Belinda increasingly speaks up and makes her voice heard in their relationship. The fact that Jandre continues to acknowledge, appreciate and accept these manoeuvres towards a more equal relationship furthermore maintains the process of her differentiation in their relationship.

> *Jandre: As ek kan aansluit ook weer, voorheen, ook, wil ek sê ek was baie dominant. E, ek, ek was baie keer so dominant, nie in die "sense" dat ek lelik met haar was nie, maar partykeer het ek sommer net gesê: "Ag, bly net stil". Dan bly sy stil......As ek nou probeer dit sê: "Ag, bly net stil", dan sal sy sê: "Ek sal nie!"*
>
> *Navorser: En hoe hanteer jy dit? Wat maak jy daarmee?*
>
> *Jandre: Nee, ag, dis niks nie. Dis niks nie. Eintlik, ek "like" dit meer so, want dit hou my ook meer op my voete.*

In keeping with the interdependence of systems and the multiple contexts and relationships of which she is a part, Belinda's differentiation is not limited to her relationship with Jandre. She is also in the process of differentiating from her family of origin. Succeeding in standing up for herself and making important decisions on her own in the stressful context of the rape and abortion, and in her relationship with Jandre, fed back into her relationship with her parents and also altered the way she interacted with them. Belinda's interactions with her parents are now frequently characterised by manoeuvres suggesting a different definition for their relationship, or suggesting that they treat her differently. The fact that her parents also mostly accept and adjust to these changes, albeit at times unenthusiastically, serves to furthermore maintain her differentiation process.

> *Jandre: ...Sy sê sommer net "straight" nou vir haar ma, "straight": "That's it". En sê vir haar pa ook net "straight": "That's it". Hulle sê niks meer terug nie...*

Belinda: ...ek het die heeltyd stil gebly, dat almal oor my loop en goed. Ek het net besluit: nee, ek is nou moeg daarvoor. Dis 'n tyd, ek moet op my voete staan en terug sê. Met al die dinge wat met ons twee gebeur het...Besluit ek het nou genoeg gehad dat my ma-hulle die heeltyd op my "pick" en dis hoogtyd dat ek moet iets sê......

Jandre: ...En Belinda het toe sommer eendag net vir haar ma gesê: "Hoor hier, ek's nie meer jou kind nie......jy moet, jy moet my nou begin respekteer soos 'n grootmens..."

In addition to the above, her new roles as wife and mother also entailed adjustments and changes to her position in her relationship with Jandre and with her family, bringing about even more transformations. She is no longer only a daughter or girlfriend: she is now a wife and a mother, with the responsibility of taking care of her family and taking care of a baby herself. Given the fact that she is more differentiated, she can stand up for and protect Jandre and her daughter from her parents' intrusiveness. Once again, the fact that Jandre acknowledges, accepts and appreciates these changes is likely to maintain her differentiation from her parents.

Jandre: ...Maar nou deesdae, sy "defend", sy "defend" partykeer vir my terug. Wat ek nogal half en half "like".

Jandre: Wat gebeur het is Belinda het die kind gebad, sy wou die kind klaarkry...En dan heeltyd vat die ma die kind en sê "hhhhooo" en dan sit sy die kind neer, en loop dan weg. En dan huil die kind. En dan, weet, waar dit gewoonlik, hoeveel, 10 minute vat om die kind aan te trek en te bad en te alles, het dit omtrent na 'n half uur se kant toe begin gaan. En die kind het onrustig begin raak, en heeltyd gryp...haar ma die kind, en wil die kind troos en wat. Belinda kan nie die kind aantrek nie, want haar ma vat heeltyd die kind. En Belinda het...ek het maar net daar gestaan en kyk. En Belinda het letterlik, ghmf, sy het so rooi begin raak. En toe sê sy net, en toe sê sy sommer "straight" vir haar ma: "Sit die kind neer, ek wil die kind klaar aantrek". Klaar. Net so. En toe sit haar ma die kind neer...En toe, en toe net so draai haar ma om en sê: "Dan gaan ek sommer nou huis toe".

From the above it is clear that the rape and its aftermath destabilised not only the couple system, but also the larger family system, to such an extent that the dysfunctionalities and tensions between these systems were amplified to breaking point. Although it was severely threatening to the couple system in the short term, in the long term this chaos contributed to their survival as it created a context where their system was forced to differentiate from the larger family system, allowing the emergence of more appropriate and clear boundaries in general. This differentiation also occurred on an individual level as the chaos provided experiences which forced Belinda to differentiate from Jandre and from her parents.

Although her differentiation initially added to the chaos in the post-rape context, the couple was able to integrate and adjust to these changes.

5.4.3 From unequal rigidity to balanced flexibility

Throughout the interviews, by sharing their experiences of the rape, subsequent pregnancy, abortion and how their relationship was impacted by these events, the couple also reflected and commented on how their relationship has changed over time. Since the beginning of their relationship they had had to establish a way to work with the differences in their respective intellectual abilities and verbal skills, and the challenges that these differences posed in terms of their everyday life and functioning as a couple. In this regard, given Jandre's higher level of functioning, he tended to take the lead in their relationship in many aspects, such as managing their finances, handling the majority of communications with external systems, earning the couple's main income and also, in accordance with his stronger verbal skills, took the lead in their discussions of issues and problems when he became aware that such discussions were required. Given her limited intellectual and verbal skills, Belinda took on a more submissive role, which fitted Jandre's dominant approach and also gave him the freedom to take control the way he did. In addition, she contributed to their relationship in other ways, for example, providing additional much needed income for the couple by working, while by withdrawing and becoming more silent than usual, she often provided a subtle trigger for Jandre to take the lead in discussions concerning their relationship.

From the above it is clear that their circumstances contributed to the couple defining their relationship as complementary fairly early on, with Jandre in the dominant (one-up) position and Belinda in the submissive (one-down) position. For a long time, this relationship definition, although unequal, was functional for the couple. This functionality was evident from the fact that the couple was self-reliant and also from the effective patterns and rules they co-evolved for their unique circumstances, such as their fine attunement to one another and their communication pattern, elaborated on in earlier discussions. In addition, they were initially also appreciative of and respected the differences in their abilities and skills. It seems that these effective patterns and rules also allowed the couple to experience their relationship as close and connected. Thus, they established a solid base or foundation for their relationship.

However, although the couple did not initially perceive or experience it as such, from an observer's point of view their relationship was also characterised by less effective patterns and processes within and outside of their system from early on. Especially restrictive to the further development of their individual and relationship's potential was the fact that the couple based their relationship definition on

limiting and superficial assumptions and preconceptions about their respective competencies and abilities. Other ineffective patterns and processes included: tolerating her parents' disrespect for their relationship and for them individually, Belinda's lack of differentiation from her parents and from Jandre, the lack of clarity in terms of their system's boundaries, the couple's enmeshed relationship with her parents and the couple's ineffective management of the flow of their system's resources both within and outside of their relationship.

As their relationship became strained by the redundancy of these ineffective patterns and processes, certain roles and responsibilities within their system became more pronounced. This especially pertained to roles and responsibilities in terms of protecting their system and also protecting and supporting one another. In this regard, Jandre became the lone warrior who took care of all the responsibilities in terms of support as well as for protection in and of their relationship, whereas Belinda occupied the role of the helpless protectee, needing to be rescued and supported. This developed into a self-maintaining cycle or pattern where the more submissive Belinda became and the fewer responsibilities she assumed in this regard, the more dominant Jandre had to become and the more responsibilities he had to assume. Similarly, the more dominant Jandre became and the more responsibilities he assumed, the more submissive Belinda had to become as less responsibilities were available for her to assume.

> *Jandre: ...Voorheen moes ek al haar "battles fight". En oordat ek al haar "battles" moes "fight", het ek dominant begin raak. Ek meen, dis amper asof ek maar net moes dominant raak. Want hoe, hoe, hoe moet ek nou anderster wees? Want ek moet nou almal se "battles fight". Ek moet nou my en haar "battles fight".*

In other words, before the rape, the continuous strain of the abovementioned ineffective patterns and processes meant the couple had become increasingly inflexible and limited in the ways they perceived and could potentially interact with one another. The positions available in their relationship became polarised as quiet, passive, vulnerable, dependent and submissive, versus talkative, active, over-responsible and dominant, with Jandre always in the one-up, or dominant, position and Belinda always in the one-down, or submissive position, regardless of system or context requirements. Furthermore, their interactions with one another, and their system's interactions with other systems in various contexts, continuously confirmed and maintained their fixed positions and roles in the relationship and their assumptions and perceptions of one another's skills and abilities.

When Belinda's parents moved into their home, the couple's relationship became even more strained, as their effective patterns and processes were disturbed, contributing to distance, ineffective

communication, conflict, resentment and tension within the couple's relationship. Their living situation furthermore increasingly threatened to destabilise their system's homeostasis. It was also during this period that Belinda was raped. The rape and its aftermath severely disrupted their system's homeostasis and pushed it into chaos repeatedly. This severe chaos not only completely immobilised the couple's already compromised communication and connection patterns and processes, but the ineffectiveness of the above mentioned redundant patterns also complicated the couple's efforts to deal with the rape and its aftermath. In this regard, as the couple attempted to do so, it became increasingly clear that their rigid complementary relationship definition, rigid roles and functions were inappropriate and ineffective in the post-trauma context, thereby feeding into and exacerbating the instability and chaos within their system.

In this regard, the rape not only disrupted the usual flow of support in their relationship, but also made evident the imbalance of the flow of support between them. Before the rape, the flow of support between Jandre and Belinda was already ineffective, with Jandre predominantly taking the lead and providing support to Belinda, while Belinda, in accordance with her more dependent and undifferentiated position from Jandre and her parents, did not support Jandre to the same degree. Immediately after the rape had been revealed, Jandre was so shocked and overwhelmed by his emotions that he could not assume the initiative in terms of providing support to Belinda. Furthermore, from Jandre's emotional response it was clear that he also required support. One gets the sense that this was one of the first times in their relationship that he was no longer able to maintain the strong warrior façade and showed his vulnerability.

However, Belinda, in addition to being severely traumatised and overwhelmed by the rape and the chaos in their system, was not used to taking the initiative in terms of providing support. Thus, in the post-rape context the couple's habitual rigid pattern, of Jandre initiating support and Belinda reciprocating, was disrupted. This meant that the flow of support between them was almost entirely suspended. As they could not soothe, or calm one another down, their emotions escalated, amplifying the instability and chaos of their system in the post-trauma context.

In addition to illuminating the ineffective and imbalanced flow of support in their relationship, the rape, and especially the pregnancy and abortion, created contexts and provided the couple with experiences which significantly challenged their rigid complementary relationship definition in terms of decision making and power distribution. In this way the decision to terminate the pregnancy became more than a life-altering decision for Belinda. It became a relationship-altering decision for the couple. Contrary to their relationship rules at that point, Belinda, as the rape victim, was forced into the one-up or dominant

position in terms of the abortion decision and Jandre, forced into the submissive position, had to abide by her choice to undergo the abortion. Thus, this decision, and the power Belinda possessed in making the final choice, disrupted their habitual pattern of decision making as well as the usual distribution of power in their relationship.

> *Jandre: Hoe ek glo is, ek glo nie eintlik dit is reg gewees om 'n aborsie te doen nie, maar......op daardie stadium was ek nie in beheer gewees nie.*

In as much as the abortion decision challenged their dominant and submissive positions in terms of decision making, it also had implications for their usual unbalanced positions and roles in terms of protective responsibilities. The fact that Belinda perceived Jandre to be more concerned about, and protective of, the unborn child, and about his identification with this child, than about her having to live through the ordeal of possibly becoming the mother of her assailant's child, disrupted their usual rigid roles as protector and protectee. In this context, Belinda realised she could not rely on Jandre to protect her unconditionally. She was forced into a position where she was obliged to protect herself not only from possibly bearing the rapist's child, but also from Jandre's concerns about and wish to keep the child. Consequently, this brought about a shift in their usually rigid patterns and roles, which furthermore destabilised their system and amplified the chaos in the post-trauma context.

From the above it is clear that the rape, pregnancy and subsequent abortion disrupted the couple system, as well as each individual's equilibrium and immobilised their effective system dynamics. In addition, during this time of great distress and upheaval, the couple was also required to deal with information about their system's ineffective dynamics made evident by these events. This information fed back into their system, amplifying the chaos within their system and the severity of the threat to their system's survival. This chaos and the threat were so severe that the couple system could no longer make small adjustments to restabilise itself and ensure its survival. In this regard it seems their system reached a point of bifurcation from where the couple emerged with a higher order of organisation, a more appropriate and functional structure and more creativity and potential for growth within and of their system (Ward, 1995).

This meant substantial changes and transformations in terms of how the couple interacted with one another. These changes continue to endure beyond the trauma context. In this regard, these experiences, where Belinda was forced into an unusual position in their relationship, and where she was also forced to self-protect and self-preserve, were essentially experiences of difference (Bateson, 1979). Experiencing herself, and also their relationship in a different way while simultaneously being aware of how it used to be, seemed to have made Belinda more conscious of her position in relationships in

general, and also made her open to alternative ways of interacting with the people around her, and especially with Jandre. This awareness set in motion a positive feedback loop in terms of her differentiation from Jandre and her parents.

As her differentiation process unfolded in the couple's relationship, she repeatedly challenged their rigid complementary relationship definition, and also Jandre's dominant position, thereby requesting or suggesting (manoeuvring) that they behave differently towards one another, that power in their relationship be distributed differently and ultimately requesting or suggesting an alternative relationship definition. The fact that Jandre mostly acknowledged and accepted these manoeuvres, and continues to do so, without countermanoeuvring to maintain their former positions, roles and relationship definition, indicates a new flexibility in their relationship, and suggests that these changes are being integrated, and that their relationship is becoming increasingly equal and balanced. This equality and flexibility are evident in the fact that Belinda and Jandre now exchange both symmetrical and complementary behaviours, and alternate between the dominant and submissive positions; power is therefore distributed more equally.

> *Jandre: En sy was letterlik so saggeaard dat ek amper bo-oor haar kon loop. Maar nou, ek kan nie me, ek kan nie meer net loop nie. Ek kan nie bo-oor haar loop nou nie, want sy staan nou op. "Even" teen my, dis baie min, maar, maar sy sê partykeer: "Nee, ag wat, ek sal nie". Sommer net so "blunt". Nie in 'n lelike "sense" nie. Sy sê dit net. Ek "fight" nie eers terug nie.* (lag) *Ek weet net ek het nou oor die, ek het nou oor die lyn ge-"step".*

In addition to the above, following her differentiation and more equal role in their relationship, Belinda increasingly shares the general burden of responsibilities previously carried almost exclusively by Jandre. This not only relieves Jandre's load, but their more equal positions in the long term ensure better continuity in their relationship, as either of them will, in future, be able to take the initiative should the other one be temporarily unable to assume his or her responsibilities. This in turn makes future stability and functionality in a crisis more likely, or at least makes it more likely that their system would restabilise and mobilise more efficiently.

> *Jandre: Dis is nie meer so baie nie. Sy't bietjie van die verantwoordelikheid wat op my was, wat eintlik haar verantwoordelikheid was, het sy nou terugge-"claim" en gesê: "Dis myne". Dis nie meer joune nie, dis myne. Wat sy terugge-"claim" het en sê: "Dis my verantwoordelikheid, ek sal daarmee handel".*

Furthermore, as mentioned in previous themes, protection of their system and of one another is an important concern for the couple, especially given Belinda's parents' pattern of disrespectful and

intrusive behaviour towards them. In addition to now assuming a more equal role in terms of general responsibilities, the disruption of their rigidified roles as protector and protectee has reset the unequal distribution of protective duties within their system as well. These duties are now more effectively and equally balanced, since Belinda now also protects Jandre, their relationship and their nuclear family.

> *Jandre: ...OK, deesdae doen Belinda dit, maar voorheen het sy dit nooit gedoen nie...as haar ma-hulle my nou kritiseer en dan altyd dan, sy's te bang om......met haar ma te, of haar pa te praat, oor wat en dan bly sy stil en dan sit sy in die kamer. Dan moet ek vir myself "defend", en ek is goed daarmee om dit te doen* (lag)*. Maar nou deesdae, sy "defend", sy "defend" partykeer vir my terug. Wat ek nogal half en half "like".*

In addition to the above, the couple's flexibility is also apparent in other contexts and relational processes. In this regard, Belinda appears to now be more responsible for regulating emotional expression in their relationship, when compared to Jandre. It seems that Jandre now sometimes lets go and relies very much on her to rein him in when his emotions get out of hand. This also means that Jandre trusts Belinda enough to reveal his vulnerability and that she can hold or contain that vulnerability while keeping their system functional.

> *Jandre: ...Maar, maar binne ons verhouding is sy meer die een wat......sy weet wanneer ek......te, te oorboord, wanneer my bloed begin te kook. Sy, sy, sy ken my al. As, sy, sy, sy weet al waar's my lyn...*
> *Navorser: En dan, wat gebeur dan?*
> *Jandre: Sy sê: "OK, OK, kom", dan, dan vat sy my terug.*
> *Navorser: So Belinda, jy hou die leisels vas?*
> *Jandre: Sy, sy hou my vas, dat ek nie verder gaan nie. Want sy weet as, as, as, as, as my b, as my doppie skiet dan, dan stop niks my nie. So, sy, sy draai die proppie weer vas.*

In other aspects, though, Jandre assumes more responsibilities and is more in control. In this regard, he assumes the dominant position in terms of managing the couple's finances. However, his dominant position in this context fits with his strengths in terms of his intellectual abilities. Given the fact that Belinda is intellectually handicapped, it makes more sense for the couple that Jandre takes responsibility and control in this area of their relationship, as he would be more capable of dealing with their finances. Also, in this context there has been a shift in that they now work together, as a team, in order to responsibly manage these. Belinda supports Jandre in his role by helping to save money wherever she can. From the above it is clear that they are increasingly adept in adjusting to and complementing one another's strengths and vulnerabilities according to contextual requirements. Furthermore, the submissive position has now become available to both of them as they are both

allowed to behave in a way which demands or requests the other person to temporarily become overly responsible or take control.

Given all these changes it seems that Jandre now also feels understood and supported in their relationship, which was not the case before the rape. Furthermore, both of them also feel that they understand one another better after having gone through and surviving the ordeal.

> *Jandre: Maar, maar eintlik verstaan ek haar al lankal. Maar nou met die ding…nou na…nou verstaan ek haar actually NOG beter, en sy verstaan my ook "actually". Waar sy my nooit "actually" altyd verstaan het nie...*

Belinda's understanding of, and sensitivity towards, Jandre is especially evident in a touching ritual she performs every morning before he leaves for work. If Ame (their daughter) is awake at that time, Belinda takes her and they say goodbye to Jandre at the door. Belinda then reassures Ame that her father will come back in the afternoon. During the interview Jandre described this ritual with great emotion and it became evident that he is deeply touched by it. It may be that, in addition to reassuring Ame, the ritual simultaneously serves to reassure Jandre that he is part of a close-knit family unit and has a place where he belongs, which is something he has not experienced in his own family, and therefore longed for his whole life. Evident from this ritual are Belinda's sensitivity towards Jandre's needs and also her shift from a dependent child-like position to the position of co-parent and spouse where she now cares for and reassures both Ame and Jandre.

> *Jandre: …En ons kweek klaar daai hegte band van…OK, as Ame slaap, dan maak sy haar nou nie wakker nie. Maar as Ame nou, nou net wakker is en speel met haar speelgoed, en ek gaan in die oggende werk toe. Dan tel sy vir Ame op en, en hulle wag by die deur en, soos in, uh, Belinda dis amper asof sy dit doen om…e, ek vra haar nie om dit te doen nie, sy doen dit sommer net. Sy sê: "Moenie 'worry' nie, Pa gaan vanmiddag weer by die huis wees"* (trane, emosioneel). *Dan wag hulle hierso en dan groet ek, nnnnhhh, en dan gaan ek. En dan as ek, as ek in die middag by die huis kom, dan's, dan, dan groet ek vir Ame en vir Belinda* (trane, emosioneel).

Thus, from the above it is evident that the couple's relationship and system has been fundamentally transformed. These changes are maintained and amplified by the encouraging information, or feedback, they receive from one another and from the environment, such as that they now communicate more, feel closer, more taken care of, protected, supported, valued and respected and more sure of one another's commitment to the relationship.

Jandre: ...want eintlik het dit ons nader aan mekaar gebring. Dit het ons "actually" nader aan mekaar gebring, as wat dit ons van mekaar af weggedryf het.

Jandre: ...Maar deesdae respekteer ek meer haar, haar besluite ook.

Jandre: Met die verkragting. Dit, toe ons nader na mekaar toe gegroei het...Ons sien met 'n ander oog ook nou mekaar, ons praat baie meer met mekaar...

Furthermore, it seems that the experience and survival of this ordeal, and their attempts to make sense of and find meaning in the aftermath of the ordeal, also transformed them individually and their relationship and system in other ways. As discussed in previous themes, after the ordeal the couple experienced a tremendous loss, despite the gains in their relationship. They both attributed this loss to the abortion and they decided to have a baby and subsequently to marry.

Jandre: ...EK, ek was bereid om 'n pa te word al was dit my kind of nie. So, dit het 'n leemte in my veroorsaak. Ek dink sy was nie bereid om 'n ma te word nie, maar dit het tog iets in haar weggevat. So, dit was 'n leemte in haar ook. So, ons het op die ou einde van die dag besluit ons gaan maar probeer met 'n familie begin...

Becoming married was something they had postponed for many years owing to various reasons, part of which was their system's former ineffective patterns and processes such as the toll and demands other people's problems placed on their system financially. However, it seems that following their survival of the ordeal and the transformation of their system, the couple began to prioritise themselves, their relationship, problems, wishes and needs. During this time the couple was faced with manoeuvres from some family members to re-establish the pre-rape status quo. In this regard Belinda's father refused to attend the wedding. However, deciding to proceed with it was a clear message to their families, and a commitment by the couple to themselves and one another, that they are now a separate family of their own and that their first priority lies with their new family.

Jandre: ...ons was baie lank saam voordat ons getroud was. Dit was meestal meer en deels finansieel dat ons nooit getroud is nie, maar oordat ons toe 'n smag gehad het om wel 'n kind te kry, toe het sy nou swanger geraak en toe het ons maar besluit maar eintlik moet ons maar trou ook. En toe trou ons ook maar in elk geval. Dit was moeilik om ons aan die trou te kry, maar dit het op die ou einde van die dag gebeur.

From a systemic perspective, having a baby and being married also transformed their relationship and system in other ways. Structurally their system has now become more complex since it now also includes a sibling subsystem. They are now also parents and marital partners, which means quite a substantial shift and additions to their roles, functions, responsibilities and commitment towards one

another and also to their new nuclear family. This also seems to contribute to their system's transformation by finally eradicating the last pre-rape redundancy in their system. They now experience themselves and one another as new and different.

> *Jandre: Ja, en ons is nuut. In die "sense" dat ons 'n familie het. Ons het, ons het, ons het nuwe*
> *dinge om na te kyk. Ons is nuut. Ons is nuwe "furniture".*
> *Navorser: Julle is nie net meer 'n man en 'n vrou nie, julle is ook nou 'n ma en 'n pa…*
> *Jandre: Ja.*
> *Navorser: Is dit wat jy bedoel?*
> *Jandre: Oo, ons is nie meer, ons is nie meer "boyfriend" en "girlfriend" nie, ons is nou man en*
> *vrou en 'n ma en 'n pa.*
> *Navorser: So, daar was baie verandering.*
> *Jandre: So, ons is nuut…twee keer verander. Dit is wat verander het.*

As the couple recounted and reflected on their experiences of the rape, pregnancy and abortion during the interviews, it became apparent that by going through these experiences, they have become quite adept at taking a meta-perspective of their relationship. They easily spoke about its functioning, comparing and explaining how it used to be and how it is now. Adopting this meta-perspective was a resource already available to them before the rape, as it formed part of their communication rules. However, from the above discussion it is clear how this rule extended beyond their communication pattern. Their ability to shift between being in the relationship, and talking about it, also proved valuable in terms of their understanding of the way they dealt with the trauma. It seems that this rule allowed them to become aware of and discuss what was not working during critical times and what needed to change. However, with their meta-perspective also emerges the painful realisation that it had taken something so extreme to force them to make the necessary adjustments and transformations to their relationship and their functioning as a couple.

> *Jandre: Ja, maar die eintlike ding is, dit is net rof om, om te dink dat so iets moes gebeur om*
> *ons nader aan mekaar te bring. Ek meen, dit is, dit is, dis nie lekker nie, nê. Ek wens iets anders*
> *kon ons nader aan mekaar gebring het, as die verkragting.*
> *Jandre: Iets vroliker, ja. Miskien as ons meer tyd vir mekaar gehad het. Miskien as ons al ons*
> *probleme net kon uitsorteer, as ons op onsself kon konsentreer… Dat ons net, net weer nader*
> *aanmekaar gekom het, iets vroliker…*

From the above it is clear that although the rape, pregnancy and abortion severely impacted on and disrupted Belinda and Jandre's usual relational and system dynamics, their system shifted in a way which allowed for greater balance, flexibility, creativity and variety in their interactions. Although

there have been substantial transformations and changes, the couple was able to preserve and maintain continuity as well. This continuity seems to lie in those functional patterns that pre-dated the traumas, such as their communication pattern, fine attunement to one another and their meta-communication rule.

5.4.4 The construction of reality: a couple's journey

Belinda and Jandre co-constructed a couple's reality as their relationship developed. This experiential reality was based on: the shared knowledge and understanding of their respective individual histories; experiences and shared interpretations indigenous to their relationship; a shared view and understanding of the world; as well as the value and meanings they attached to and their commitment to their relationship. Fergus and Reid (2001) postulated that while this experiential reality forms the basis for a couple's dance, in other words, for the processes, patterns and rules a couple co-constructs between them, it is also in a circular manner continuously shaped and re-shaped by these relational and system dynamics. They also referred to the above as a couple's sense of themselves as a unit, or as a "we".

It was evident from Belinda and Jandre's account that the reality they so constructed contained certain resilient aspects and meanings which proved vital in preserving their system and relationship in the aftermath of the rape. In this regard, based on their knowledge of each other's childhood histories, both of them seemed to be aware of and sensitive to one another's struggles and difficulties with their respective families of origin. Furthermore, given these childhood histories and experiences, they appeared to share a view of nuclear family relations as not necessarily dependable or benevolent. As a result an important aspect of the reality they co-constructed, or of their sense of we-ness, seems to be that they both attach much meaning to the fact that their relationship is very different from the relationships in their families of origin. As such they regarded their relationship as valuable, as a place of belonging, as one that needs to be protected, but also as offering respite and protection from their families of origin.

Apart from the above, their co-constructed reality was also established on a very specific, limited and superficial perspective and understanding of the skills, competencies and potential each of them brought to their relationship, which they based on overt behaviour and abilities. Jandre made certain assumptions about Belinda based on what he knew about the general characteristics of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, while Belinda accepted these assumptions and abided by them. Neither Belinda nor Jandre recognised her uniqueness as a person. The acceptance of these assumptions limited their recognition of still emerging, or less obvious, individual strengths and competencies. Similarly, their assumptions

regarding Jandre were equally one-dimensional, emphasised his capabilities and overlooked his vulnerabilities.

> *Jandre: ...Oordat ek haar man is, en ek was ook haar "boyfriend", ek was haar verloofde, het ek probeer Belinda baie verstaan...Ek kon nie...ek het geweet sy is half gestremd, maar sy was nie rêrig gestremd...toe het ek navorsing gedoen, en myns insiens van hoekom Belinda gestremd is...Fetaal Alkohol Sindroom...Dit is wat Belinda het...En hoe ek verstaan dat 'n mens, en hoe mens met so 'n persoon werk is, mens gee hulle 'n "gap", dat hulle hulself wees, maar probeer verstaan hoe hulle dink. En dit is hoe ek Belinda beter leer ken, want ek, want ek probeer myself in haar skoene staan en ek weet hoe sy dink...*

As mentioned in the previous theme, their above understanding and perspective restricted the role definitions they developed in their relationship and was evident from the fact that Jandre's role was co-constructed as that of the strong, capable, talkative partner in accordance with his stronger verbal skills and intellectual abilities, and Belinda's as that of the weaker, introverted, dependent and helpless partner in accordance with her intellectual handicap and speech impediment. This understanding of one another, and the roles they developed, also manifested in their rigid complementary relationship definition.

Although this reality was to a large degree functional and effective for them, it was evident that their perspective and understanding of one another contributed to the creation of problematic internal relational and system dynamics. These included an ineffective, imbalanced and sometimes non-mutual flow of support, protection and understanding between them, as well as non-beneficial patterns of interactions with external systems, such as Belinda's parents, which allowed their system's resources to become depleted. Hence, although initially consistent with their experience and understanding of one another, their families and their world, this reality was also inherently vulnerable as it contributed to the construction of a rigid and imbalanced relationship at risk to become disorganised in extremely stressful situations or contexts.

As the couple increasingly became burdened by external pressures, such as Belinda's parents' interference and dependence on the couple, tensions rose within their relationship. These tensions began to erode their already vulnerable reality as the couple began questioning some of their shared understandings and assumptions of their relationship and of one another, their role definitions and ultimately the way their relationship functioned. In this regard, it became increasingly evident that Jandre was overwhelmed by, and could no longer be the sole carrier of care and responsibilities in their relationship. He became resentful and irritated with the way their relationship functioned, supported

Belinda less and also began treating her differently and sometimes disrespectfully. However, at that point, given their relationship's rigidity, the couple could not evolve or construct any alternative way of being with one another. Rather, in keeping with the reality the couple constructed, Belinda became even more dependent and submissive in the face of Jandre's increasingly dominant behaviour, which in turn required him to assume more responsibilities, unbalancing their system even further. As discussed in previous themes, this contributed to a situation where they increasingly deviated from some of their co-evolved and effective patterns and rules, especially in terms of how they communicated about and dealt with conflict and differences in their relationship. These changes began to erode the stability of their system, slowly moving it towards chaos.

> Jandre: ...Ek het moeg geraak om al die "battles" te doen. En juis daarom het, het ek partykeer met haar ook bietjie vasgesit en sê: "Dit werk nie so nie. Ek kan nie als doen nie".
>
> Jandre: ...maar partykeer het ek sommer net gesê: "Ag, bly net stil". Dan bly sy stil...

The occurrence of the rape fed into this relational cycle by furthermore eroding their already vulnerable reality. During the first week after the rape, before Belinda revealed the rape to Jandre, the confusion, silence and secrecy that surrounded the rape brought about misunderstandings. These distorted their perceptions of one another's behaviours and their perceptions of their interactions, which in turn created mutual distrust between them. Their mutual distrust of one another fed back into their reality, placing into question the validity and basis of their view of and assumptions about each other and of their relationship as safe and dependable.

After the rape was revealed and the ensuing shock threw their system into chaos, the basis of their relational reality became even more eroded. In this regard the immobilisation of the couple's effective communication pattern and the disruption of their pattern of attunement to one another were especially erosive as these prevented the couple from connecting and co-constructing a shared understanding and view of the rape and the crisis they were facing (Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998; White & Rollins, 1981). Not having a shared understanding and view of the trauma, and of one another's experiences and needs, meant that they initially struggled to function effectively as a unit in the post-rape context.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the rape it became evident that their usual imbalanced flow of support, care and understanding and their construction of Jandre as the strong partner who takes the lead, and Belinda as the weaker partner who follows his lead, fed into and amplified their difficulties to remain a functioning unit. In this regard they could not alternate or share positions in terms of providing and receiving support and care, and ultimately both of them became extremely isolated and unsupported. With the couple increasingly less functional as a unit, their relationship also no longer offered the same

protection from their families of origin it used to offer. Their difficulty in protecting their relationship at a time when its survival was under severe threat was furthermore exacerbated by their system's diffuse external boundaries. Thus, rape and the disorganising impact of the trauma on their relationship, undermined their continued construction of their relationship as a safe place, and ultimately amplified the already vulnerable aspects of their reality. In a recursive manner, their pre-existing relational vulnerabilities did not equip them with the necessary flexibility required to effectively deal with a trauma as extreme as rape.

As the rape unfolded to include an unexpected and unwanted pregnancy as well as uncertainty about the unborn child's paternity, the couple's vulnerable co-constructed reality became almost completely overwhelmed by the emergence of two disengaged and mutually exclusive individual realities. Belinda's reality was that of a rape victim, in all probability pregnant with her assailant's child. Jandre's reality was one of possibly becoming a father of his own biological child or becoming a willing surrogate father to the rapist's child.

From Belinda's position and prominent individual reality as a rape victim, protecting herself from the pain and trauma of the rape and reminders thereof were major concerns. She was furthermore concerned about her ability to be a good mother to the unborn child, should she decide to bear the child. In addition to the rape, she was obliged to deal with the very difficult decision of undergoing an abortion, a decision which did not fit with her beliefs, which she ultimately had to make on her own and which caused her profound distress.

> *Belinda: ...As ek sou daardie kind gehou het, gaan die verkragting elke keer opkom......*
> *Belinda: ....Ja, dit was bietjie moeilik gewees vir my. Dit was hard genoeg op my gewees om daai besluit te neem...Weet nie hoe gaan ek hanteer as ek die kind gehou, gehou het nie. Hoe, hoe, hoe reageer ek nou oor die kind en goed. En ek was bang gewees.*

On the other hand, Jandre's experiences of the pregnancy and abortion were strongly coloured by his history as regards his family of origin and his prominent individual reality as a child of rape. He furthermore also believed that abortion was wrong. The combination of his beliefs in terms of abortion, and his reality as a child of rape, was pivotal in terms of how he attempted to deal with the pregnancy. His history brought about a strong identification with this unborn child and he furthermore also seemed to find meaning and purpose for his own life story and experiences through the possibility that he now might become the father of a rape child himself.

> *Jandre: ...Maar die rede hoekom sy my verwag het is want sy was ook verkrag...So, ek het myself toe gesien...*

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Jandre: Ek is GEMAAK om daai kind groot te maak. Dis toe, dit is hoe ek myself gesien het, op daai stadium. Ek is gemaak om daai kind groot te maak. Ek is van so kleins af groot geword met al die dinge en ek moes self 'n kind grootmaak …….. (baie hartseer)

As is evident from the above, although extremely distressing and overwhelming for both, their respective experiences of the pregnancy and paternity concerns were also completely different and irreconcilable. Belinda clearly did not want to keep the child because of what the child represented to her, whereas Jandre was convinced that keeping the child was the right thing to do, because of what the child represented to him and because of his strong identification with this child. Reconciliation of these prominent individual realities were especially difficult so shortly after the initial upset of the rape, as their system was already in chaos and extremely unstable. Their struggle to deal with the pregnancy and abortion as a couple was especially evident in their decision making process concerning the pregnancy. Although they initially attempted to make a joint decision, this attempt was ultimately derailed partly by the impact of their mutually exclusive individual realities.

Jandre: ...Want ons het "actually" klaar besluit sy gaan die aborsie toe doen. Maar toe agterna, toe, toe, en ek het regtig my "mind" ge-"change". Het ek gesê ons doen dit nie. Ek dink nie dit is reg van my om dit te doen nie…en toe, sjoe, dit was rof gewees, en toe wil sy toe nou nie...

The profound erosion of their vulnerable couple's reality and the emergence of two disengaged individual realities, not only threw their system into more chaos, but also had the reciprocal impact that the couple did not posssess, or could not co-construct, a unified way or concept in which to approach or deal with the pregnancy or the abortion. Furthermore, the complete breakdown of their usual communication pattern meant that they did not command the means, at this point, to construct a shared understanding and view of these extremely stressful events and the challenges they were facing as a couple. It also prevented them from sharing and therefore recognising the validity of one another's experience, perspective and ultimately one another's reality.

Jandre: Ek het letterlik vir 3 dae pal met haar gesmeek: "moenie die aborsie doen nie". Ek het haar geSMEEK sy moet dit nie doen nie…En ek het vir 3 dae lank…Sy het naderhand, as ek my mond oopmaak, het sy gesê: "Ek weet wat gaan jy sê. Bly net stil".

It seems that Belinda and Jandre's experiences of these events not only profoundly threatened their vulnerable couple's reality, but also threatened to destroy the basis of their view of the world and religion, as they struggled to understand, find explanations and meaning in what was happening to them individually and as a couple.

> *Jandre: ...maar ons geestelike kant was heeltemal...ons het nie geweet wat ons mee, ons het naderhand, EK het naderhand gedink daar is nie eers meer 'n Here nie, want hoekom kan Hy so iets doen aan ons?*

However, amidst this chaos, the continuous threats to their relationship in the post-rape context also brought recognition by both that their relationship, and ultimately their haven of belonging and safety, was under threat. Thus, the crisis was no longer only about the rape, pregnancy or abortion, but also fundamentally about their relationship and their we-ness. In other words, although their prominent mutually exclusive individual realities coloured their experiences and perceptions of the whole ordeal, disconnecting them and disrupting their efforts to deal with these events as a couple, their recognition of the crisis in their relationship and the threat to their we-ness became shared concepts themselves. It was these growing shared concepts that fed back into the post-abortion context triggering a search for pathways to the crisis' resolution and the protectiveness of their we-ness that pushed them into action and turned them to the church for help.

> *Jandre: ...Ons sou lankal geweet het wat ons moes doen, "even" al het sy swanger geraak, sou, sou ons presies geweet het. Maar eers toe alles nou op ons neerpak, woep, soos 'n swaar las, toe wil ons nou begin afskud en toe wil ons nou begin kerk toe gaan...Dit is waar ons die meeste ondersteuning gekry het...*

It seems that the services and information offered by the church enabled Belinda and Jandre to take meta-positions in respect of the rape, pregnancy and abortion as well as in respect of their abovementioned mutually exclusive individual realities. This entailed them having to step away somewhat from their personal experiences and emotions, and therefore also from their individual realities, in order to see, appreciate and understand these events, their experiences and emotions from the other person's perspective.

> *Jandre: ...want ek het naderhand haar, haar punt begin raaksien. Kyk, ons kerk het nie mooi die aborsie so geondersteun nie, maar hulle het ons geondersteun, en, en, en ons besluit ook geondersteun. Toe sy nou, toe sy nou op die ou einde die aborsie gehad het, toe het hulle ons weer ondersteun in, in die feit om met dit te "deal". Verstaan. Maar met dit wat ons nou daarso gepraat het en terapie daar gekry het, het ek ingesien hulle punt van hoe Belinda ook daarna uitgekyk het en toe het ek naderhand die punt daar ingesien hoekom Belinda dit gedoen het.*
> *Belinda: ...Ek weet dit was vir hom ook bietjie moeilik, want hy was ook self daardeur.*

In other words, the information and services provided by the church ultimately fed back into their relationship in a way which not only stabilised their relational and system dynamics, but also ordered the chaos of their mutually exclusive realities by providing a coherent and integrated explanation and

approach to these events and to the crisis in their relationship. Thus, by focusing on the couple's relationship, the church provided Belinda and Jandre with information that emphasised their unity and enabled them to co-construct a shared understanding and view of the events they have endured. This, in turn, fed into the restabilisation of their system and helped them to integrate the events into their history as a couple.

In addition, the shared concept of a crisis in their relationship naturally also shifted the couple's focus to their relationship which, in turn, brought about awareness and sensitivity to the under-organisation of their system. This extended beyond the chaos of their mutually exclusive individual realities, and these stressful events, to include a meta-view of their effectual, ineffectual and non-beneficial relational processes, patterns, rules and meanings, within and outside of their relationship. As discussed in previous themes, the chaos of the rape and subsequent events and their abovementioned awareness and sensitivity created a context which allowed for the transformation of these ineffectual and non-beneficial dynamics, such as Belinda's differentiation from her parents and Jandre, clear and effective external system boundaries, their relationship definition becoming more parallel and the establishment of an effective and balanced flow of support, care and understanding between them. Although continuity was provided by some of their former more effective patterns, such as their communication pattern and attunement to one another, from a systemic point of view, a change in one part of a system also means a change in all the other parts of the system (Bateson, 1979). This means that their effective patterns and meanings were also adjusted to fit with the couple's new patterns and rules.

Through this process their focus also shifted to each other and their rigid and limited view of one another became evident. As their interactions as a couple changed, and their interactions as individuals with external systems altered, this information fed back into their relational reality, transforming their perception and understanding of one another. In this regard, they became increasingly aware of and sensitive to Belinda's strengths and Jandre's vulnerabilities. Thus, their view of each other became more balanced, allowing them to co-construct one another as equal partners.

From the above it is clear that the couple's reality was vulnerable at the time the rape occurred and that the very basis of their relationship was severely threatened by the chaos that ensued as the rape unfolded to include a pregnancy and abortion. However, from this chaos they emerged with a transformed and changed relationship based on the co-construction of an integrated and cohesive couple's reality which includes more appropriate, balanced and effective shared assumptions, understandings and views of one another, their relationship and their world. The strength and resiliency

of this reality is especially evident in the fact that it can tolerate the couple moving on the higher level of this reality, while still recognising their individual, but now connected realities.

5.4.5 The destructive chaos of secrecy

As discussed in chapter three, secrecy often occurs in the post-rape context. For Belinda and Jandre, secrecy amplified the chaos brought about by the rape, pregnancy and abortion, as well as by the reciprocal impact between these events and the couple's pre-existing relational and system dynamics. In this regard, in the process of dealing with these events, three secrets emerged, namely, Belinda initially keeping the rape secret from everyone, the couple and most of Belinda's family keeping the rape secret from her father, and also the secrecy surrounding the aborted child's paternity. In addition to these three secrets emerging in the post-rape context, the couple also had to deal with the impact of Jandre's family's long time open secret surrounding his paternity.

Initially the rape became an individual secret (Karpel, 1980) which Belinda kept for a week, before she finally revealed to Jandre what had happened. As discussed earlier, her being traumatised, presenting with acute stress reactions, and her limited intellectual abilities and verbal skills were important contributors to her silence and her keeping the rape a secret. From her taped individual reflection it also became apparent that, in addition to the above factors, she initially also kept quiet about the rape in order to protect Jandre and her family. It also seems that she protected herself, as she indicated that she had difficulty trusting anyone at this point.

> *Belinda: Toe't hy my seergemaak...weet nie hoe om vir my ou te sê wat gebeur het nie...dit was moeilik gewees... Dit was moeilik gewees om, uh, enige een te vertrou. Dit was vir my moeilik gewees om die gesin te sê...het vermoed dit mag hulle seermaak...*

The interpersonal impact of this secret was immediately evident on the day of the rape. Although Belinda attempted to protect Jandre and her family, the secret's impact was quite different as her behavioural changes led to much uncertainty, interpersonal discomfort, confusion and anxiety. As mentioned, Jandre had difficulty understanding and explaining Belinda's behaviour and he eventually interpreted her behaviour in terms of infidelity. His interpretation furthermore raised tensions about the possibility of a destructive secret, namely a possible extramarital affair. From the discussion of previous themes it was possible to see how the initial secrecy regarding the rape fed into and amplified the couple's already pre-existing distance and tension, which quickly escalated into the couple's complete disconnectedness and the complete breakdown of their once effective communication pattern. This, in turn, threatened the couple system's survival by driving it into chaos.

Furthermore, Belinda's keeping the secret from her family and Jandre in order to protect them, in all likelihood also marked the beginning of the shift in power relations within the couple, discussed in the third theme. In this regard, Belinda usually was the one who had been protected by Jandre, especially from her family. However, the rape now created a context where she was the protector. Thus, it is possible to see how the secrecy regarding the rape impacted on various areas and levels of the couple's relationship, and ultimately also began to disrupt their respective rigid roles, the distribution of power in their relationship and ultimately their relationship definition. As the rape unfolded to include a pregnancy and abortion, it became evident that this initial shift may have triggered a positive feedback loop in terms of the couple's usual pattern of interaction. This loop was then furthermore amplified by the fact that Belinda increasingly had to take responsibility for her own protection in their relationship, as it became evident that Jandre could no longer fulfill his role in a way she perceived as having her best interests at heart.

After Belinda revealed the rape to Jandre, the couple informed the rest of her family, with the exception of her father. Thus, the rape once again became a secret, but this time it was an internal family secret: in other words, some family members were privy to the secret, while her father was not (Karpel, 1980). Once again it is possible to observe the immediate and disruptive interpersonal impact of this secret on the interactions and dynamics of everyone involved. As mentioned earlier, the family members, who now were "secret knowers", argued and disagreed amongst themselves about when to inform her father and Jandre continuously pressured Belinda and her family to inform him as soon as possible. These disagreements, conflicts and the pressure amplified the already pre-existing tensions and precarious homeostasis within the larger family system, as well as the instability brought about by the rape.

From the couple's account it was also evident that her father often instilled fear in the rest of the family because of a history of his own aggressive behaviour escalating into physical violence. It therefore may be the case that keeping the rape secret served a protective function, and that in this regard, they were protecting Belinda, and themselves, from the way in which her father might react when informed of the rape. In addition, given the above power dynamics within the larger family system, it may also be the case that the secret of the rape furthermore had the unexpected consequence for family members of possessing a degree of power over the man they all feared, based on the fact that they now knew something he did not.

It later became apparent that the fact that Jandre, who had not really been accepted by Belinda's father as her partner, was included in the secret and also eventually revealed it, merely added to the disruptive impact of the secret when it was exposed. As discussed in the second theme, in Belinda's enmeshed

and over-involved family system, Jandre was not accepted and often marginalised and excluded. However, the secrecy around the rape created a context where her family's boundaries had now shifted so that her father became marginalised and excluded from the system while Jandre, technically a non-member, was included.

The impact of the alteration in the above boundaries of and within Belinda's enmeshed family system was evident when the rape was finally revealed. As described in the second theme, at this point Belinda's father accused Jandre of not being able to protect his daughter and a physical conflict ensued between Jandre and her father. Furthermore, the fact that finally Jandre was the one who revealed the rape to her father also seems to be significant in terms of power relations within and amongst these systems. Once again, if viewed from a systemic and interpersonal perspective, her father's response and comments may be understood as an attempt to re-set or restore the boundaries of his family system and his position in the family, by emphasising Jandre's status as non-member and as a threat, rather than a partner, to Belinda.

Despite the chaos that ensued after the rape was revealed, in the long term it seems that the way in which the rape was kept secret between Jandre and the majority of Belinda's family members, and also the way by which it was revealed, ultimately contributed to Belinda and the couple system's differentiation from her parents and the couple evolving more appropriate boundaries, not only between their system and her parents' system, but also in general.

As the rape-trauma unfolded and the couple received confirmation that Belinda was pregnant, concerns about the unborn child's paternity resonated with former multi-generational open family secrets in Jandre's family. In this regard, Jandre's life history and individual reality as a child of rape himself, the secrecy that had surrounded his paternity for a long time, the family myth that finally disintegrated and his experience of his family relationships in this regard, now also impacted on the couple's relationship and their trauma. As discussed in the fourth theme, his family's open secrets, his lifelong experiences and his identification with the unborn child initially threatened to destroy the couple's co-constructed reality. Thus, this multi-generational family secret fed into the already extreme chaos within the couple's relationship at a critical time, furthermore amplifying the threat to their system's survival.

Having survived and experienced significant gains and growths from eventually dealing effectively with the rape, pregnancy and abortion, Belinda and Jandre still struggle with the potentially most disruptive and threatening secret of all, namely the aborted child's paternity. Although not a secret in the usual meaning of the word, the child's paternity is still information that is available in the couple's larger ecology, to which they do not currently have access to. In this regard, the impact of the secret on

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the couple's relationship lies in the fact that the potential availability of this information still sporadically destabilises their system, as Jandre seems driven to finally clarify the uncertainty. On the other hand, Belinda prefers to live with a different kind of certainty, namely that she did the right thing for her, their relationship and the child, regardless of the child's paternity. As the couple continues to attempt to deal with this secret, they oscillate between their respective mutually exclusive individual realities and their cohesive, integrated couple's reality. This at times keeps these events prominent and complicates the couple's efforts to move on.

> *Belinda: Ons wil net vrede maak en net aangaan…*
>
> *Jandre: Dit sal aan haar nie 'n verskil maak nie, sy het my al gesê sy wil nie weet nie. Kyk, "obviously", as dit die verkragter se kind was, gaan dit maar niks verskil maak nie. Want ek het klaar daarmee ge-"deal". Maar "obviously", kom ons sê dit was nou my kind…………………*
>
> *Navorser: Hoe sal dit julle raak?*
>
> *Jandre: Dit gaan moeilik wees. En ek dink dit gaan nog harder wees op haar ook. Want, want oor alles wat rof is vir my, is ook rof vir haar. Dit is twee keer so erg vir haar as wat dit vir my is. So, as dit rof gaan wees vir my, as ek weet dit was "actually" my kind. Gaan dit "actually" erger wees op haar, want sy sê sy het "actually" my kind doodgemaak.*

From the above the disruptive interpersonal influence the secrecy exerted, and still exerts, on the couple's experiences of the rape, pregnancy and abortion is evident. It is also clear how secrecy amplified the chaos within their system and the larger family system in the post-rape context. In this regard it is especially significant that the couple and larger family system's escalations into severe chaos all occurred after secrets were revealed.

5.5 CONCLUSION

As a couple, Belinda and Jandre were exposed to stranger rape and then two extreme stressors in a very short space of time. Severely destabilised by the initial rape, the subsequent unwanted pregnancy and abortion repeatedly pushed their system and relationship further into chaos. These were evident from their individual responses, as well as from the temporary immobilisation, and even complete disruption, of their relational and system patterns, processes and rules. However, it also was apparent that their relational patterns, processes and rules, and the disruption and immobilisation of these dynamics, reciprocally impacted the way in which the couple dealt with these events.

From the thematic discussion it was clear that, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the couple's experience of the rape and subsequent extreme stressors, as well as of the complex interplay between these events and their system, one needs to consider their functioning as a couple before the ordeal. It

was apparent that as their relationship developed, they co-evolved certain meanings, effective and ineffective patterns, processes and rules. Their more effective dynamics included their pattern of fine attunement to one another; pattern of connectedness; relational closeness; mutual trust; adequate problem solving skills for their unique circumstances; and a functional communication pattern. On the other hand, their limiting and ineffective dynamics included: inappropriate and diffuse couple system boundaries; a superficial understanding and perception of one another's skills and abilities; fixed role definitions based on these perceptions and understanding; a rigid complementary relationship definition; unequal distribution of power and control; and ineffective and unbalanced allocation of system resources and responsibilities within and outside of their system.

The thematic discussion showed that, before the rape, these ineffective and limiting relational dynamics were gradually wearing away their more effective patterns, processes and rules. This was evident from the escalating tension, conflict, frustration, irritation, occasional disrespect and sporadic distance between them. However, despite experiencing difficulties and dissatisfaction in certain domains of their relationship before the rape, in other respects they still experienced their functioning as a couple as effective in that they were self-reliant and successfully resolved their unique communication challenges. It was also clear that, despite some dissatisfaction and relational tension, they still regarded their relationship as precious and remained committed to one another. This was evident from the fact that: protection of their relationship, while also a source of conflict between them, was regarded a high priority; from the time they spent together as a couple; and from their openness about and frequent attempts to address and clarify the difficulties and frustrations in their relationship, albeit not always in effective ways. In other words, in the context of ordinary daily stressors, the above aspects as well as their more effective relational dynamics, kept the destabilising impact of their ineffective dynamics and external stressors within manageable limits.

In the thematic discussion it was demonstrated that, although not critically problematic in daily functioning, this precarious stability and these limiting and ineffective dynamics made their relationship and system inherently vulnerable to become disorganised under extremely stressful or chaotic conditions. The rape, subsequent pregnancy and abortion created just such extreme conditions. These events made extraordinary demands on them as individuals and on their system and relationship. Essentially high levels of system and relational flexibility and adaptability were required in order to effectively deal with the events, as well as with the subsequent chaos and instability. However, it was clear that their limiting and ineffective patterns, processes and rules made for a rigid and under-organised system and relationship, initially struggling considerably to make the necessary adjustments

and changes to meet the demands of the post-rape context, thereby amplifying the chaos and instability brought about by the rape.

In this regard, their rigid complementary relationship definition, fixed dominant and submissive positions and their fixed role definitions were especially pivotal in impacting the manner in which they dealt with the rape. As was illustrated, it initially restricted Belinda and Jandre from effectively alternating positions to take the lead or initiate action, to adequately care for, console and contain one another, and also restricted the way in which they could support, fill in for or share their usual individual responsibilities and functions.

In addition, as was evident from the discussion, the destabilising impact of the rape rippled through their entire system, also immobilising and disrupting their more effective dynamics, and especially their communication pattern and pattern of fine attunement to one another. As mentioned above, these patterns were instrumental in compensating for the instability brought about by daily external stressors and their ineffective and limiting relational dynamics. The information about these immobilisations and disruptions fed back into their system escalating their agreed upon level of relational closeness towards unacceptable and threatening distance and eventually disconnecting Belinda and Jandre. Furthermore, with these patterns no longer as efficient in regulating and maintaining their system's stability, the chaos brought about by the rape escalated significantly.

These escalations towards disconnectedness and chaos set in motion negative feedback loops to restabilise their system, evident from the couple's repeated manoeuvres to restore their communication pattern and reconnect with one another. With their diffuse system boundaries not adequately warding off additional threats, these attempts at reconnection and stabilisation were constantly derailed by Belinda's parents' interference. As could be seen, these repeated interruptions and the threat it posed to their reconnecting and their system's stability, as well as the couple's realisation that Belinda was pregnant, finally pushed their system into severe chaos. At this point the threat to their system's survival, posed by this chaos, became too great and their system began to mobilise.

It was clear that the manner in which the couple mobilised finally brought an end to their system and relational rigidity or stuckness. They had to interact and relate differently with one another in order to effectively handle and survive these events and subsequent chaos as a couple. These experiences of difference made new information available to their system in respect of Belinda's strengths and potential. In this regard the couple experienced that she can also be the leading partner or the partner in the "one-up" or controlling position, that she can make decisions on her own and for the couple, and that she can assume responsibility under very difficult circumstances including responsibility to protect

herself, Jandre and their relationship. Information also emerged in respect of Jandre's vulnerabilities. The couple experienced that the submissive or "one-down" position can be available to him as well and that he therefore does not always have control of what happens between them, that there are certain decisions he cannot make and certain responsibilities that are not his to assume. Through these experiences of differences Belinda and Jandre did not only become more aware of their functioning as a couple, but their perception and understanding of themselves as individuals, each another and the manner in which they participated in their relationship, were also changed.

The theme discussion furthermore showed that, in the process of mobilising to protect and ensure their system's survival, they not only began to interact and relate differently with one another, but also with external systems and individuals. They became acutely aware of their habitual non-beneficial interactional patterns and relationships with these individuals and systems. In this regard, as their manoeuvres to protect themselves and their relationship escalated, their changed behaviours and new awareness triggered various positive feedback cycles. These cycles eventually contributed to the transformation of their system's boundaries to become clear, appropriate and flexible. Closely linked with these transformations, the threat posed by these events and their system's disorganisation in the aftermath of the events also required Belinda and Jandre to become aware of and change the manner in which they allocated available system resources and energy so that preference was given to their system's requirements. Once again these transformations were maintained in the long term, as the couple continues to interact with external systems and individuals in a way which clearly communicates and demonstrates that the wellbeing of their relationship and family is their priority.

It was clear that these transformations essentially consisted of changes to their relational and system patterns, processes, rules and meanings, which in turn meant that their system's structure itself was changing. Structural changes are always accompanied by system instability as well as distress and uncertainty for system members, and therefore these changes initially amplified the instability, chaos and distress brought about by the rape, pregnancy and abortion. From a systemic perspective, however, it is important to keep in mind that a system cannot make changes, or transform itself and survive without maintaining some continuity (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Looking back, it is possible to see that continuity in Belinda and Jandre's system and relationship was partly maintained by the resiliency of their more effective patterns. This resiliency was evident from the fact that these patterns were not destroyed despite repeated immobilisations, disruptions and even changes to their positions and roles in the relationship. Furthermore, after each immobilisation or disruption, these patterns not only restabilised fairly quickly, but they could also simultaneously undergo adjustments and transformation amidst severe system chaos.

In addition to the above, the couple's clear sense of themselves as a unit, or of their we-ness, also seemed to provide continuity in the chaotic aftermath of these events and amidst the simultaneous and ongoing transformations in and of their system. In this regard, the couple's sense or understanding of their unit as safe and as offering protection fed into their interactions and behaviours in the aftermath of the rape, pregnancy and abortion. This was evident in the couple consistently turning to one another for consolation, containment and support, rather than and before turning to anyone else, including family members. Furthermore, although they later turned to external systems and individuals for practical assistance and advice, they continued to primarily rely on one other for emotional support and reassurance. In other words, despite the chaos brought about by the disruptions in their usual connectedness and closeness, and the couple's difficulty in providing adequate support, care and containment to one another, their sense of their unit as a safe haven remained. It also seems to have contributed to both positive and negative feedback cycles, providing direction in the post-trauma chaos and confusion. In this regard, their continuing to turn to one another for safety and protection helped restabilise and remobilise their patterns of connectedness and communication, while simultaneously transforming these patterns into a deeper connectedness transcending their previous reliance on verbal communication. This enabled the couple to access and provide one another with the support, care and containment they both needed, while their system mobilised. This, in turn, contributed to the restabilisation of their system as a whole.

In addition to the above, the threat to their unit, the couple's acute awareness of this threat, the value and meaning they attached to their unit seemed to recursively feed into each other in the aftermath of these events. This was evident from, as indicated earlier, the couple continuously and determinately acting to protect their unit. Furthermore, even with initial misunderstandings, severe system instability, changing patterns, processes and rules, and also the emergence of disconnected individual realities in terms of the abortion, the couple remained determined to deal with the ordeal as a team and they continued to approach trauma centers and the church together. Their commitment to one another and to their unit especially became clear from their concern for their relationship and the way in which they engaged with one another and sought counseling to deal with and heal the rift brought about by the abortion. Thus, it is clear how their sense of their unit as valuable, committed and requiring protection provided direction in the immediate and longer term aftermath of their ordeal. In turn, the commitment and willingness showed by both to, without questioning and despite individual differences, support and care for each other, to protect their relationship and to take the time and make the effort to understand one another's experiences of the ordeal fed back into their "we-ness", confirming and strengthening their understanding of their unity as committed and precious.

It is clear that Belinda and Jandre's relationship and system maintained enough continuity amidst the chaos to provide a solid base from where, once their system's rigidity was destroyed, they could begin to co-evolve new ways of interacting and relating to one another. Although these new and different ways of participating in their relationship initially emerged to deal with the enormous crisis at hand, they also illuminated the efficiency and inefficiency of their usual patterns, processes and rules in the process. Furthermore, as their system began to stabilise and information fed back into their system regarding the appropriateness and efficiency of these changes compared to their old patterns and rules, these positive feedback cycles were maintained bringing about even more adjustments and changes to their system in the long term. From the above it is clear that the couple emerged from the chaos of the rape and subsequent pregnancy and abortion with a flexible, balanced, equal, creative and resilient relationship and system.

CHAPTER 6

LIESEL AND CORNE: OUT OF MUSIC AND OUT OF RHYTHM –

A DANCE COMING UNDONE

6.1 THE CONTEXT

Liesel and Corne live in a three bedroom townhouse situated in a security complex within a middle class suburb. The interior of the house reflects the fact that three young children live and play in the house, and may be described as slightly disorganised, yet warm and homey. The interviews were conducted in the living room, which is open plan together with the dining area. Liesel initially indicated their children would be with her parents, to allow some privacy and prevent interruptions during the interviews.

During both joint interviews, however, the children were at home and spent the time watching television in one of the bedrooms. The children were clearly uncomfortable with the researcher's presence in the house. From the researcher's point of view, though, the children's presence provided meaningful additional information in terms of the interactions and patterns between the couple and sibling subsystems, and also between Liesel and Corne. In this regard, the children provided distraction, interruptions and diversions at critical points during the interviews. They would, for example, at times enter the living room, not wanting to leave, while Corne and Liesel were often called by the children to assist them or they left the room separately and out of their own volition to attend to the children. This complicated the interview process, and in many ways prevented, disrupted or restricted discussions about the rape. As is considered later, this in itself fits with the couple's overall pattern of avoidance in terms of discussing serious relationship problems, trauma and stressors, including the rape. It also confirmed the information obtained during the interviews, namely that the boundaries between the couple and sibling subsystems are diffuse and that the children are triangulated into the couple's relationship, providing distraction from the couple's serious problems.

6.2 INITIAL IMPRESSIONS
6.2.1 Telephonic contact

The researcher obtained the telephone number of this couple through a friend of a friend. The researcher contacted Liesel first and discussed the purpose of the call and the nature of the research. Liesel was eager to participate, but first wanted to discuss the possibility of their participation as a couple with Corne. We arranged a date and time for a second call during which she would provide the

researcher with an answer. When the researcher phoned on the agreed day, Liesel indicated that she had not yet spoken to Corne and we agreed on another day and time for feedback. When the researcher phoned on the agreed day, Liesel informed her that she had spoken to Corne, but that he had posed many questions which she could not answer and she had therefore requested the researcher to contact him directly. She provided the researcher with a cell phone number. The researcher phoned Corne and explained the purpose and nature of the research. During the conversation, he expressed some concerns about confidentiality, which the researcher clarified. Initially he seemed reluctant, but agreed to a first interview: an appointment was made for a public holiday as Corne indicated that this was the only day he had available for an interview due to work-related time constraints.

6.2.2 Interviews

During the interviews, Corne came across as evasive and distant, and he especially avoided discussions of the rape. On the other hand Liesel came across as eager to share her experiences of various difficulties, stressors and trauma, other than the rape, which she, and the couple, has endured over the years. Yet, although coming across as almost over-sharing, it seems that the extensive discussion of other stressful events and difficulties was her way of distancing herself from, or evading, discussion of the rape. What became evident during the interviews was that Liesel and Corne are quite disconnected and out of rhythm as a couple. The interviews were furthermore characterised by fast alternating manoeuvres and countermanoeuvres for control, for closeness and distance, incongruent communications and double messages, as well as attacking and defensive manoeuvres between Liesel and Corne, which had the impact of often deflecting the conversation away from the research topic. Towards the end of the second interview it also became evident that the research interviews were a vehicle for long overdue conversations between Corne and Liesel, furthermore adding to the distraction from the said topic.

In addition to the above, the researcher was struck by the disrespectful nature of the couple's communications and interactions with one another in the interview context, which manifested both verbally and non-verbally. They often interrupted one another, not giving each other a chance to finish sharing his or her experience, feelings or answers to the researcher's questions and literally, at times, talked the other person into silence. These disrespectful frequent interruptions had the impact that neither of them could effectively share his or her experience. Furthermore, laughter and humour were often used in subtle ways to defuse tense moments in the interviews, or as manoeuvres for distance in the discussion of contentious issues. Although the use of humour in this way is not disrespectful as such, it seems that, in this couple, it was indeed used disrespectfully as a way to defuse personal

discomfort without regard for the impact on the other person while at times it also showed contempt for the other's feelings, experiences and point of view.

The impact of all the above on the researcher was that it was at times difficult to guide, and keep, the conversations to the research topic. In this way she became part of the couple's pattern of avoidance around the subject of rape. As discussed in chapter four, the researcher was left with numerous questions following these two interviews and attempted to arrange a third interview with the couple to fill in the voids apparent in the information obtained from these interviews. Corne was unavailable due to work-related constraints, but answered additional questions via e-mail. In this additional written reflection, his pattern of evasiveness was maintained. A separate face-to-face interview, with the same questions as basis, was conducted with Liesel. In Corne's absence, Liesel was more forthcoming about the rape. However, a similar pattern was repeated to that in the first two interviews, because she tended to discuss non-related aspects extensively. It also became apparent that the rape was, and still is dwarfed by the extent and persistence of the couple's longstanding and serious relational problems.

During the joint interviews, it became apparent that the couple is quite adept at putting forward a front, or mask, to persons external to their system. This mask purports that although their relationship is presently characterised by distance and disconnectedness, they are fully aware of this. They also maintain that it is a temporary situation based on circumstances beyond their control, but that they are willing to make these sacrifices for the greater good of a secure future. However, their individual reflections, Corne's written additional answers and the individual interview with Liesel, painted the picture of a relationship that has been distant and disconnected for many years and indicated that their relationship now appears to be at a crossroads where a decision in terms of their future as a couple needs to be made.

6.3 BACKGROUND
6.3.1 Personal

Liesel is 34 years old and the younger of two daughters. She obtained matric or grade twelve, and after school she completed a children's day care certificate. Although she worked briefly at the beginning of their marriage until after their first child was born, she has primarily been a stay-at-home mother for the duration of their marriage. Liesel described her family of origin as conventional, but indicated she always experienced difficulty verbally sharing and discussing her problems with her parents. She stated that it was easier for her to write letters to her parents whenever something was bothering her.

According to Liesel she had been abused since the age of six years and this continued until the end of high school. The perpetrator was their neighbour's son, who was approximately ten years older than her. According to Liesel the sexual abuse included vaginal and anal penetration as well as bondage type sexual activities. Liesel never revealed the abuse to her parents when it was ongoing. She indicated that, when she was in high school, she could no longer cope with the abuse and attempted to commit suicide by overdosing on medication. According to Liesel her father was very angry about her suicide attempt and physically beat her.

Her father's reaction to her suicide attempt prompted her to make the decision never to tell her parents about the abuse, as she assumed they would not understand. When she eventually revealed the abuse to her parents, they did not believe her. She went to a private clinic, where a psychological assessment was done, which apparently proved she had been sexually abused. At that point she was already involved in a relationship with Corne and he provided her with financial assistance to undergo the assessment. After the assessment furnished evidence, the couple shared the findings with Liesel's parents. Her parents then believed her and offered their assistance. However, feeling indignant about the fact that her parents had only believed her on provision of proof, Corne and Liesel decided to deal with her sexual abuse trauma themselves.

Corne is 41 years old. He is the youngest of four children. He obtained two Bachelor's degrees, works in the computer industry as a consultant (on contract), and is also involved in another part-time business venture which he hopes will provide financial independence and security. When his family of origin was discussed he initially came across as reluctant and somewhat evasive. Once confidentiality concerns were addressed, he appeared to be more comfortable. He indicated that he had experienced an uncomplicated upbringing and that he maintains fairly good relationships with all his family members.

During the individual interview with Liesel, she revealed that Corne was allegedly raped while doing his compulsory military service in the National Defence Force. She indicated that he only shared this information with her after the couple was married. According to Liesel, during this conversation he indicated to her that he had already dealt with what had happened to him, and that this would be their last conversation about the matter. Since Corne did not volunteer the information, and based on what transpired when he disclosed the information to Liesel, the researcher thought it best to not approach him about the matter.

6.3.2 Their relationship

Liesel and Corne met one another through her older sister while Liesel was approximately in matric. Corne and Liesel's sister became friends through religious and church-based camps. As part of this friendship, Corne would visit her sister and in this way Liesel and Corne came to know one another. Shortly thereafter they both started taking guitar lessons and it seems that their relationship developed from there. They became engaged in 1994, married in 1995 and had their first child, Christelle, in 1996. They had another daughter, Melinda, two years later. After these two children, Liesel had two miscarriages, and finally fell pregnant again in 2003. Their son, Hein, was born in April 2004.

From the information supplied by the couple, it was evident that the family is quite symptomatic, both in terms of physiological and psychological health concerns. Hein was born with a life-threatening heart defect and required two heart operations before he was two months old. Since then his development and health have been relatively normal, with the exception of some residual heart problems and severe constipation difficulties. His condition has to be monitored and he will have to undergo further operations in future. In addition to Hein's health problems, Christelle also experienced health issues which required surgical intervention to her digestive tract. Following the operation she now eats very little. Melinda is suffering from enuresis and the couple now suspects she may have been sexually molested recently. Furthermore, Liesel has a history of self-mutilating behaviour by burning herself with cigarettes, depression and several suicide attempts, including a near-fatal attempt by overdosing on medication in 2007.

In addition to the above, the couple provided information indicating a long history of serious intimacy issues and an intimacy pattern characterised by profound dysfunctionality. Although elaborated on in the thematic discussion, given the severity and prominence of their difficulties in this regard, these are briefly outlined as part of the couple's background. In this regard, it was evident that Liesel and Corne hold irreconcilable beliefs in terms of what constitutes acceptable sexual activities in a marriage. The combination of the irreconcilability of their beliefs, Corne's preference for bondage type sexual activities and Liesel's history of childhood sexual trauma which included such activities, continue to be a source of major conflict, distress, anxiety and dissatisfaction in terms of intimacy in their relationship. This, in turn, constantly presents a threat to their system's overall stability and harmony. Their tension and discomfort around the issue of intimacy were almost palpable during the interviews and were especially evident from the evasive and broad terms in which they discussed their difficulties in this regard.

6.3.3 Rape-trauma

The rape occurred in October 2004 in the public restroom of a shopping centre frequented by the couple. The rapist was a man of African descent. According to Liesel she immediately consulted her family doctor after the attack. The doctor referred her to a private hospital for the necessary examination and assistance. The doctor also gave Liesel a letter which apparently explained to Corne what had happened and what needed to be done. Liesel went home and gave Corne the letter. He offered to take her to the hospital, but she indicated he should rather stay home with the children, as she did not want the children to be upset.

6.4. THEMES
6.4.1 An imbalanced dance: maintaining individual autonomy

An intimate adult relationship requires joining, or a sense of togetherness, as well as individual autonomy or separateness between partners (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). The challenge for a couple is to achieve and maintain a balance between these processes. This means being able to function separately as individuals while maintaining a sense of cohesion and connectedness with one another through mutual support, care and understanding. Similarly, being together or joining with one another means giving up a part of the self to be with the other, but in such a way that it does not destroy or deny the integrity of either partner's self and world of experience (Cole & Cole, 1990). A couple thus needs to find a way to establish a sense of togetherness, without losing or completely giving up the "you" and "I", and also have to maintain the separateness of "you" and "I", without undermining the establishment and functioning of a solid foundation for their relationship. This challenge to find balance between individual autonomy and togetherness resembles a constant dance between partners, and whenever the dance sways too much to either side, the couple's relationship becomes unstable or threatened and may even become dysfunctional or be destroyed (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988).

When the couple's dance is unbalanced towards the pole of individual autonomy and separateness, this signifies that the couple promotes this way of relating at the expense of joining with one another and maintaining a sense of togetherness. If this process is allowed to continue unchecked, it will eventually manifest in relational distance and even disengagement or disconnectedness between partners. Such a relationship is likely to be characterised by rigid and often largely impermeable boundaries between partners and they may fail to provide one another with a sense of intimacy, support, nurturance and care. In contrast, when the couple's dance is unbalanced towards the pole of too much togetherness, the couple promotes togetherness, joining with one another and a sense of belonging at the expense of separateness and individual autonomy. Boundaries between the partners may become blurred and

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partners may become fused and overly dependent on one another for support, care, nurturance and approval (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1990).

From Liesel and Corne's interaction during the interviews it was clear that their dance was imbalanced towards extreme separateness and individual autonomy. Although they at first glance appeared to dance a couple's dance, it became apparent during the interviews that this was a superficial dance or pattern of interactions limited to well-known steps and dance movements on a pragmatic level, specific to Corne's role as financial provider and Liesel's role as child carer. In this regard they still complement one another and are relatively effective in the execution of their responsibilities in these roles. However, on a deeper level both came across as feeling extremely unsupported and isolated in their respective roles and both experienced their relationship as characterised by an ever-increasing and profound lack of togetherness and belonging. Their disconnectedness and disengagement as a couple was evident from their lack of support, care and nurturance of one another in stressful and crisis situations; especially with regards to Liesel's rape.

From the couple's accounts of their respective individual histories, their descriptions and perceptions of themselves and of one another, it was clear that, as individuals, both tended to be sensitive to and ambivalent about too much interpersonal closeness and have a propensity to value separateness and autonomy in relationships. Both indicated they felt rather uncomfortable sharing their feelings, needs and concerns with others, tend to avoid becoming too close in relationships, avoid conflict and usually first attempt to deal with problems, including personal trauma, on their own.

> *Liesel: Uhm, so ek dink met my was dit nog altyd van as ek regtig wou kommunikeer, of met iemand gesels of so, dan skryf ek briefies. Dis vir my die maklikste, en dan kan ek redelik eerlik wees* (lag). *Dis vir my partykeer moeilik om met iemand te praat en regtig te sê hoe ek voel en so aan.*
>
> *Corne: ...Ek is nie 'n persoon wat met my gevoelens op my baadjie loop nie.*
>
> *Corne: ...Ding is net, weet......ek persoonlik voel, uhm, dit verander niks nie. Dissss, so ek, ek gesels nie baie maklik nie..........*

Given the above, the dance that emerged between Liesel and Corne was one of discomfort with and ambivalence about closeness, or with too much or too intense togetherness. Early on in their relationship the above manifested on various levels and was evident in their lack of sharing important parts of their individual selves, including feelings, needs, concerns and parts of their histories with one another, as well as from their avoiding discussions regarding relationship problems and issues. The sexual trauma histories both of them brought to their relationship seem to have fed into and amplified

their individual discomfort and the early movement of their dance towards the pole of separateness or individual autonomy. In this regard, as mentioned in chapters two and three, sexual trauma disconnects interpersonally as it imbues all levels of intimacy or closeness between individuals with anxiety, fear and distress (Herman, 1992). Both Liesel and Corne indicated that her childhood sexual abuse has exerted a huge impact on sexual and non-sexual intimacy and closeness in their relationship. Although Corne's trauma was not discussed in detail, one may hypothesise that this also affected their relationship to some extent. Furthermore, keeping recursion in mind, their individual preferences for autonomy in relationships, emerging dance as a couple and their sexual trauma histories also fed into other relational patterns and processes, simultaneously affecting and being affected by dynamics such as their evolving communication pattern and rules, coping and problem solving skills as well as the negotiation of a relationship definition and individual and system boundaries. These are elaborated on in the themes discussed later in this chapter.

Early on in their relationship and by sharing their personal traumatic experiences, the couple attempted to alter the movement of their dance from individual autonomy towards joining and togetherness. However, the manner in which they shared these experiences was characterised by superficiality, disconnection and was also fraught with double messages as they on both occasions simultaneously manoeuvred for closeness and distance. In this regard, Liesel did not disclose the details of her sexual abuse to Corne directly, but did so with a psychologist as mediator. This not only confirmed profound discomfort in addressing intimacy concerns in their dyad, but also at this juncture already pointed to significant distance between them as partners.

> *Navorser: Het julle oor die molestering gepraat?*
>
> *Liesel: Uhm, weet jy, ons was by LK, wat 'n sielkundige is, wat ons dit hanteer het. Want, soos ek gesê het, in die begin nadat ek en Corne, die eerste jaar, was ons omtrent net daai jaar een keer intiem. So, uhm, dit was op daai stadium 'n groot probleem gewees. En Corne het gevoel dat hy die probleem in ons huwelik is, terwyl dit nie hy was nie. Dit was die omstandighede wat veroorsaak het dat ek opgetree het soos wat ek opgetree het. En daar, uhm, toe ons saam met die sielkundige gewerk het, het dit vir die eerste keer regtig uitgekom. Van wat gebeur het en so aan.*

Similarly, although Corne disclosed his trauma to Liesel directly, this disclosure was accompanied by a very clear message that no conversation would be tolerated about his experience, either immediately or in the future. Thus, although he shared painful information about himself with her which seemingly was a manoeuvre for closeness, he did so in a disengaged and superficial way. This confirms Corne's profound discomfort not only with sharing painful emotions and events, but also with too much

closeness. The way he opened up to her also effectively precluded any attempts for support or containment from Liesel's side.

> *Liesel: So ja, en ek dink ook nie Corne het ooit regtig byvoorbeeld met sy ouers gepraat as hy 'n krisis gehad het en so aan nie. Uhm, ek weet net, nadat ons getroud is, het Corne vir my een keer gesê van toe hy in die Weermag was van daai ouens wat hom verkrag het. Hy't gesê: "Ek gaan vir jou iets sê. Ek sê dit een keer vir jou. Jy moet hoor wat ek vir jou sê. En dan is dit oor en verby en ons praat nooit weer daaroor nie". En toe't hy dit vir my gesê. En toe't hy gesê, maar hy is "fine" daarmee, hy't dit klaar hanteer, dis oor en verby. Maar ek dink nie, as ek vir jou moet sê, eerlik moet sê, dan ek dink hy't dit ooit hanteer nie. Ek dink dit is maar soos wat met my gebeur het: van dis iets wat gebeur het, en jy sny dit af, en jy probeer aangaan met jou lewe. Sodat jy nie hoef te "deal" daarmee nie. Uhm, so ja, ek dink in daai opsig was dit……vir Corne baie moeilik.*

From the above it is evident that opportunities for connection and joining with one another were transformed into situations that became warped with tension and anxiety. This confirmed their above individual perspectives that sharing and discussion of painful issues, traumatic or stressful events with one another do not alleviate distress or bring about needed care and support and that it should therefore be avoided. Thus, the way in which the couple dealt with these disclosures furthermore amplified their difficulties in joining as a couple and also laid down a pattern of avoidance for dealing with painful and unpleasant emotions, events and relationship issues. This tension and anxiety, and also their ambivalence and discomfort with closeness and intimacy as a couple, were amplified even further when Corne continued to expect Liesel to engage in bondage type sexual activities, despite knowing her history and negative experiences in this regard. At this point it became clear that not only was the risk she had taken, in revealing this intimate aspect of herself and painful part of her history, being disregarded, but that the integrity of her world of experience was also being denied.

In addition, the fact that the couple did not provide one another with containment after these revelations and the fact that their dysfunctional sexual pattern remained unchanged, also offered new information about their functioning as a couple. This information fed back into their system, changing their perceptions, experience and the very foundation of their relationship. In this regard, the way the couple interacted shifted from not knowing or understanding one another's needs and experiences to interactions based on disrespect of and unconcern with one another's experiences and needs. Thus, it defined their relationship as one where joining or togetherness is not about mutuality, but is, rather, concerned with satisfying either partner's needs at any one time and even at the expense of the other's needs or wellbeing. The impact of this on their relationship was that it lessened trust, precluded the

couple from establishing their relationship as a safe, mutually considerate and containing space, contributed to largely impermeable individual boundaries in the couple system and also brought about a struggle to have their individual needs met. Joining and togetherness shifted from being uncomfortable to becoming threatening, distressing and conflict-ridden as it implied significant sacrifices by one partner to the benefit of the other. This whole process seems to have set the tone for and established their dance as one that promotes the "you" and "I" above the "we".

While the couple was still in the process of establishing a solid foundation for their relationship by dealing with and negotiating many of the above struggles, they unexpectedly became pregnant with their first child, and two years later had a second child. According to Whitaker (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988) the inability of a couple to establish their relationship before becoming parents, often sets the stage for a vulnerable partnership, as the couple's struggles and negotiations are then likely to multiply and extend to the parental subsystem as well. Thus, the couple's dance becomes a family affair, involving all systems and all the members, increasing the possibility of inappropriate cross-generational triangulation, while also amplifying the distance between partners.

Whitaker (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988) postulated that, in the absence of an adequately caring, nurturing and supportive relationship, both partners may be overwhelmed by the demands of parenthood. For Liesel and Corne, the birth of their first child and Corne's subsequent five months' absence from the family due to working overseas, meant that their difficulties in joining and their struggle to establish a solid foundation based on mutuality in the couple subsystem were also generalised to the parental subsystem. This also laid down a pattern for their separate or autonomous approach towards parenting. Thus, when Corne returned from overseas, and in keeping with the increasingly predominant pattern of individual autonomy and separateness in the couple subsystem, they struggled to join and establish a sense of togetherness as parents. The impact of this was that they could not form an effective parental unit.

> *Liesel: …5 maande hierso wat Corne in oorsee was. Wat ons hom nooit gesien het nie…En, uhm, so daarso het ek baie geleer om, uhm, uhm onafhanklik te wees en my eie ding te doen. Uhm, ek het Christelle se bottels gemaak, ek het haar doeke omgeruil, so alles was ek, ek, ek, ek. Toe kom Corne terug, toe's dit van "Kan ek jou help met dit?" Dan sê ek: "Nee, toemaar ek sal gou-gou". Of "Kom ek doen dit", dan sê ek "Nee, toemaar, ek het dit klaar gedoen". Verstaan jy, so in daai tyd het ek baie geleer om dinge net, jy doen dit net. Dit is nou maar net so. Uhm, en ek dink deur die jare het dit maar net so aangehou…* (Corne begin praat)

From the information provided during the interviews it became apparent that the above interaction between Liesel and Corne, in other words his offering to help with the children and her declining his offer, eventually developed into a redundant pattern in the parental subsystem. This pattern also had implications for and set the stage for the pattern of interactions that emerged between the parental and the sibling subsystem. With Liesel predominantly handling all the activities and daily responsibilities in terms of the children and Corne's relative uninvolvement (not necessarily by choice) in these activities, the children and Liesel have grown extremely close. Corne, on the other hand, does not share in this closeness and he is very strongly excluded from this tight group. For example, the couple indicated that when it is bedtime for the children, they will not go to sleep, unless Liesel lies with them in the bed. The above not only highlights their separateness as parents, but also illustrates how their dance as a couple has become so distant that the children often fulfil the role of dance partners.

> *Corne: Ag, weet, soos Liesel sê, ek, jy weet sy't maar meeste die kinders se dinge hanteer. Dit is hoekom hulle baie meer, jy weet hulle, ek meen, ek kan by hulle gaan lê en hulle soek nog steeds hulle ma. Weet, nou gaan lê ons altwee in die bed, ek meen, dan sê ek "Maar se voet", weet, dan staan ek op en gaan werk ek of gaan kyk ek televisie, of wat ook al.*

The imbalance between individual autonomy and togetherness, as well as the abovementioned emerging patterns, are likely to have been maintained by the couple's continued exposure to extremely stressful events over the years. In this regard, these events required the majority of the couple's energies and resources to be directed away from the couple subsystem, towards maintenance and stabilisation of the family system and the sibling subsystem. It is also likely that these events and system maintenance requirements provided convenient distraction and distance from the couple's relational difficulties. For example, the couple dealt with Liesel's miscarriages in accordance with their patterns of avoidance and individual autonomy, each focusing on him or herself and on their respective roles as financial provider and child carer, rather than dealing with their conflict in terms of the timing of the pregnancy.

> *Liesel: Ja, ja, en daar is nooit regtig oor gepraat nie. Nie dat ek dink dit altyd help nie, uhm, byvoorbeeld met die twee miskrame…Ek was swanger met die een babatjie en ek het vir Corne gesê, dit wa, ek kan nou verstaan dit was 'n slegte tyd. Corne het gevoel van dit was nie nou die regte tyd om swanger te wees nie, en, uhm, hy't op daai stadium net vir my gesê "time out", en ons het nog nooit regtig weer daaroor gepraat nie…*
>
> *Corne: …Dieselfde met, ek meen die miskrame het my net soveel geraak. Ek is nie 'n persoon wat met my gevoelens op my baadjie loop nie. Uhm, ek het nie TYD om daaroor te tob nie. Want elke minuut, elke uur wat ek nie werk nie isss…'n paar rand minder wat ek nie het nie...*

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According to the couple the only time they felt closer to one another while dealing with an extreme stressor was when their third child, Hein, was diagnosed with a serious heart problem shortly after his birth. Yet, when asked to elaborate on how the way they dealt with Hein's illness was different from the manner in which dealt with other extreme stressors and traumas, it appears that they again fell back on their pattern of avoidance and focused on their respective roles. Thus, they also dealt with this stressor in an imbalanced and disconnected fashion by not balancing their practical responsibilities and their concern for their child with support and concern for one another or for their relationship. Liesel spent her time at Hein's side in hospital, and Corne alternated being at Hein's side with his responsibilities of earning an income, sorting out medical aid problems and keeping family members and friends informed.

> *Corne: ...Uhm, weet, maar ag ek, ek dink weet, ek meen, onsss, ek dink seker van al die kinders het onsss seker, dink ek, uhm, die naasste aan mekaar gewees met Hein se geboorte, met sy trauma en goeters. Jy weet, want dit het mens skielik, uhm, ek meen, selfs toe eintlik, weet, ek het haar by die hospitaal gaan aflaai, ek het gaan werk. Dan het ek gou in die middag 'n draai daar gaan maak, dan het ek terug gegaan werk toe, dan't ek in die aande haar gaan haal...*
>
> *Corne: ...Nee, ag ek meen, weet, uhm, ek dink ons het mekaar baie meer ondersteun as deur enige ander situasie.*

One may hypothesise that in a couple system, continuously destabilised by external and internal stressors and traumatic events, the system came to place a high premium on homeostasis and stability in a context that was threatening and ever-changing. Thus, the said system began to tend towards morphostasis. This is evident from the above discussion, as the couple tended to deal with all stressors and traumas in the same way, namely in accordance with entrenched patterns of individual autonomy, avoidance of one another's painful emotions and a focus on practical system tasks and the children. It may be that in this continuously changing context the only aspects the couple could reasonably control were how they interacted with one another, how they dealt with intensity between them and how they dealt with their own and one another's emotions. Limiting their awareness of one another's distress by avoiding discussion of any emotionally-laden issue, including stressors, traumas and relationship problems, may have been a temporary solution to maintain some sense of stability and ensure their system's survival in times of crisis.

This solution may have been partly effective and functional at those times as it at least ensured the survival and smooth running of the family system. However, the solution was also maintained during periods of relative calm as the couple continued to deal separately with the lasting impact of these events. In this regard Liesel frequently entered individual therapy, whereas Corne increasingly spent

time at work. The impact of this rigid and individual way of approaching and dealing with traumas, stressors and relationship problems was that it maintained and even strengthened the impermeability of their individual boundaries, to a large extent preventing the mutual flow of support, care and nurturance between them. This in turn maintained the couple's dance towards separateness and individual autonomy, amplifying the distance and disconnectedness between them.

> *Corne: Ja, vir seker…Want mens weet nie wat aangaan nie, weet jy…voel uitgesluit en so aan……*
>
> *Liesel: Uhm, so ja, op die ou einde van die dag maak dit dit baie moeilik, want jy voel jy is stoksiel alleen, uhm. Op 'n stadium het ek gevoel ek kan nie regtig met Corne praat nie,*
>
> *Liesel: Party dae is ek kwaad vir Corne, omdat hy nie kan verstaan dat ek alleen voel nie.* (Lag) *Maar dan moet mens na die ander prentjie kyk en besef, maar, hy werk regtig hard…*

Over the years, the couple attempted to address these difficulties and the disconnectedness in their relationship by briefly going to therapy and also attending church-based marital camps and marital seminars. Thus, they seemingly occasionally attempted to modify their dance towards more involvement, and to achieving more togetherness. However, these attempts at change were not acknowledged by or incorporated into their system. One may hypothesise that the couple was, and is, in an impossible situation as the adjustments or changes required to correct or lessen their disconnectedness and disengagement, namely sharing intense emotions, joining and togetherness with one another, are the very scenarios about which both of them feel ambivalent and tend to avoid. Furthermore, past attempts by the couple at sharing, joining and togetherness have been distressing and uncontaining experiences which actually amplified their disconnectedness. Therefore it is also likely that the input from these camps, seminars and therapy may not have been congruent with their system and may therefore have been too threatening to be accepted by and integrated into their system.

Taking a different position, one may hypothesise that, rather than attempting to change their dance towards more togetherness, their attending these seminars and camps has become part of the process of maintaining their dance of individual autonomy and separateness and therefore part of maintaining their system's homeostasis. If one considers their attendance of camps and seminars as brief sequences or interludes within their larger dance of individual autonomy, and more specifically, as first order corrections of fluctuations towards extreme relational disconnectedness and distance, their eventual return to their former patterns makes sense. In other words, when their relational distance and disconnectedness become extreme and exceed the parameters of what is acceptable and comfortable within their system, the couple addresses the distance and disconnectedness by going to a camp or seminar. Part of this correction entails temporarily and superficially adjusting their interactions to the

input received from these events, until their relational distance returns to its previous parameters and the homeostasis is re-established. Once this occurs, the correction is no longer needed, and the couple returns to their usual rules and patterns of avoidance and individual autonomy, discarding the input from these seminars and camps. Thus, one may hypothesise that the couple's preference for homeostasis and the resultant rigidity in their relational and system dynamics limited their openness to broadening their repertoire of skills and to exploring other ways of interacting and behaving with one another.

> *Liesel:* (Lag) *Kommunikasie tussen ons is bitter min, hoor. Ons het op 'n stadium by die sielkundige Imago geleer. Ag, ji, dit het seker 'n maand of 2 gehou en toe is dit weer oor en verby* (wrang lag). *Corne is nie 'n ou wat…hou van praat nie, hoor.*
>
> *Liesel: En ek dink nie een van ons twee weet regtig hoe om dit te hanteer, en hoe om werklik daaroor te praat nie. Ons was op 'n stadium, seker…nog voordat Hein gebore is, was ons op 'n huweliksverrykingskampe gewees. Wat ons tot daar was om te kyk van, uhm, kan mens nie dinge meer laat uitwerk en beter maak en so aan nie. En ek meen dit hou vir, kom ons sê vir 'n maand of twee, en dan…gaan dit terug soos van hoe dit was.*

For this couple, the rape appears to be just another traumatic event in a long line of continuous external and internal extreme stressors and traumas, adding to the burden of an already overloaded and vulnerable system, presenting yet another threat to their system's homeostasis which needed to be managed and minimised. The disclosure of the rape was discussed earlier as part of the couple's background and it was evident that this disclosure unfolded in a pattern similar to their disclosures regarding their individual sexual traumas years earlier in that both Liesel and Corne's behaviours were characterised by contradicting manoeuvres for closeness and distance. It furthermore was clear that in the immediate aftermath of the rape, the couple responded to the trauma in accordance with some of their other entrenched and redundant patterns. Firstly, they avoided focusing on one another's distress and needs, by focusing on system pragmatics and shifting their attention to their parental roles by keeping the children safe and contained. Secondly, from the onset they did not deal with the rape as a unit, but rather as individuals with Liesel going to the hospital on her own, while Corne stayed with the children.

On the one hand one may hypothesise that their focus on practical arrangements allowed the couple to immediately distance themselves and their relationship from the rape, thereby discounting the potential destabilising impact of another trauma on their system's homeostasis. However, consideration of what was "not said", "not asked" or "not done" during the above interaction also indicates another interpretation. In this regard the conspicuous absence of congruent comfort-seeking behaviour, such as

Liesel telling Corne herself rather than handing him a letter, of a congruent supportive and caring response from Corne, such as asking "how are you?", or "how do you feel?", or physical contact and consolation between them, or his taking decisive action by arranging that someone else took care of the children while he accompanied her to hospital, especially highlights the extent of their unconcern with one another, their avoidance of one another's emotions and needs and their extreme disconnectedness and separateness as a couple.

In accordance with their pattern of avoidance of traumas and painful events, during the joint interviews and in their written reflections, the couple maintained they never discussed the rape. However, during the individual interview with Liesel it became apparent that there had been a brief discussion about the rape: a once-off factual discussion limited to aspects such as where the rape occurred, at what time, and what the race of the perpetrator was. Following this conversation, Corne took action on a practical level, by approaching the management of the shopping centre. He enquired about the availability of security tapes which could possibly have been utilised to identify the offender. After being informed that there were no security cameras in the public restrooms, he suggested to the centre manager that the security system be improved. Once again, what was **not** discussed, shared or done during the couple's conversation illustrates the extent of their disconnectedness. The couple did not make any further effort to discuss the rape, or to provide support, care or consolation to one another in the post-rape context. It appears that both just continued with life as if nothing had happened.

> *Liesel: …Vir ons is dit beter om, om as goed gebeur het, dit op die agtergrond te sit en te fokus op wat jy nou het, en vorentoe te kyk, en, en die seer ag, basies agter jou te sit. Verstaan jy? Dit is nie regtig goed wat ek dink ons regtig aan karring en…konsentreer nie…Uhm, so ek dink in 'n groot mate het mens geleer om daai seer en goeters self te hanteer en dit agter jou te sit en te fokus op jou kinders. Want ek meen, op die ou einde van die dag, dink ek, is ons kinders vir ons altwee uiters belangrik. Uhm, en dis vir ons belangrik dat hulle gelukkig moet wees en dat hulle stabiel moet wees en, uhm, as daar krisisse met HULLE is, sal ons DIT eerder hanteer as wat ons regtig krisisse teenoor onself, tussen onself sal hanteer.*
>
> *Corne: Ek het nie regtig 'n gedagte oor hoe ek voel oor die verkragting nie omrede ek en my vrou nie regtig ooit gepraat het oor die verkragting nie.*

Although the couple never discussed how they were going to deal with the rape, it seems that both of them made certain assumptions about how the other wanted to deal with, or is dealing with it, and also how they as a couple were going to handle it. In this regard, Liesel assumed Corne's silence about the rape was created by his difficulty in coping with the rape and not knowing what to say to her. She furthermore assumed they were not going to inform their families, based on the couple's past

experience of the family as unsupportive in trauma contexts. Corne, in turn, assumed Liesel had decided on her own how the rape would be handled and whom she wanted to tell, and that she did not want to discuss it with him. From the above it is clear that these assumptions were arrived at in accordance with the couple's patterns of avoidance, impermeable individual boundaries and preference for individual autonomy.

Their avoidance of the rape and the extent of their disconnectedness were especially apparent in the interviews. In this regard they both knew very little about the other's emotions, needs and experiences in the aftermath of the rape. They struggled to describe or reflect on their experiences of each other during this time and often referred the questions back to the researcher, or to one another, so that each could comment on his or her own experiences. Furthermore, Liesel seemed to rely a great deal on her personal assumptions about how she thought Corne felt, whereas Corne more often settled on providing vague and evasive answers.

> *Navorser* (aan Corne)*: Jy praat nou van die impak op Liesel, wat sou jy sê, hoe het jy die impak daarvan op Liesel ervaar?*
>
> *Corne: Ek het, ek het in die brief gesê ons het nooit daaroor gepraat nie. Ek meen, ek het, uh, ek het nie daarvan geweet nie. Uhm, ek kan nie, ek kan nie vir jou sê nie…*
>
> *Navorser* (aan Corne)*: Sy het vir jou daarvan gesê?*
>
> *Corne: Jaaa, half seker meer vir terloops……*
>
> *Liesel: …Uhm, met Corne, uhm, het hy nie regtig, ek weet nie, ek praat nou namens hom, maar hy't nie regtig geweet hoe om dit te hanteer nie.*
>
> *Liesel: My man weer, kon niks vir my sê nie! Hy het nie geweet wat om hy vir my moes sê nie! Dus het dit gekom en gegaan!*

From the above discussion it is clear that Liesel and Corne's dance had been established as unbalanced towards extreme separateness and individual autonomy long before the rape occurred. This trauma, and the manner in which they dealt with the event fed back into their relationship, serving as confirmation of this dance.

6.4.2 Intimacy: from discomfort to dysfunctionality

As was evident from the previous theme, difficulty in negotiating and agreeing on aspects regarding sexual and non-sexual closeness or intimacy consistently presented a huge challenge for Liesel and Corne. Their difficulty in this regard cannot be linearly ascribed to any one event, factor or relational process. Rather, it seems the reciprocal influence between a combination of factors and processes fed back into their system complicating their efforts to find a workable and agreeable solution. These likely

included their sexual trauma histories; their individual ambivalence about and discomfort with interpersonal closeness as well as their emerging, and later established relational patterns of avoidance and disconnectedness. During the interviews it was apparent that their difficulties in terms of sexual and non-sexual intimacy remain a major source of conflict, dissatisfaction and tension and therefore also a continuous threat to their system's stability. Their relational tension and ambivalence regarding these issues were also apparent during the interviews and had the impact that the couple sometimes provided contradictory or vague information regarding past traumas, how they dealt with these traumas and about their relationship. Furthermore, intimacy discussions were vague, indirect and characterised by manoeuvres for distance as well as inappropriate and disrespectful emotional expression.

From the history provided by the couple, it was evident that in addition to their pattern of avoidance in dealing with trauma, extreme stressors and intimacy concerns, their pattern of sexual intimacy was characterised by an underlying discomfort and initial insensitivity, which finally escalated into dysfunctionality early on in their relationship. Their discomfort and insensitivity towards one another's sexual needs and experiences were initially evident in how the couple went about dealing with the interpersonal impact of Liesel's childhood sexual abuse. Liesel indicated that due to her history, she found sexual intimacy and especially foreplay extremely difficult and distressing. Early in their relationship, she did not disclose the details of the sexual abuse to Corne. Corne, on the other hand, although not aware of the nature of the sexual abuse she was exposed to, knew that this had occurred. Given this knowledge, the way he interacted sexually with her, namely according to his preference for bondage type sexual activities, comes across as insensitive to her past experiences as well as to her needs as a sexual abuse survivor in the immediate context of their sexual interaction. In this regard, he was insensitive to the likelihood that the lack of care and sensitivity inherent to bondage activities could possibly exacerbate her distress and anxiety regarding sexual intimacy. Rather than disclosing the nature of the sexual abuse, or clarifying her discomfort about these activities with Corne, Liesel initially dealt with her distress and discomfort by avoiding foreplay and sexual intimacy or engaging in the sexual act in a disconnected (dissociated) way.

Her avoidance of and dissociative behaviour during sexual encounters resulted in Corne's needs in terms of sexual intimacy not being met. Furthermore, not fully knowing or understanding why she was behaving in this way, contributed to his interpreting Liesel's behaviours as a reflection on and rejection of him. This most likely engendered much discomfort for him as well, which he, in turn, did not share or clarify with her. Thus, although Liesel in all likelihood did not intend to be insensitive towards his needs, it does appear that he experienced her as being insensitive in this respect. In addition, although this was not discussed with Corne, one may hypothesise that social perceptions of bondage type sexual

activities as abnormal and unacceptable, and Liesel's perception of these activities in this light, contributed to feelings of guilt and shame for Corne, and that he possibly also interpreted Liesel's avoidance and dissociative behaviours as rejection.

> *Liesel: ...En dan gebeur dit* (with reference to the bondage type sexual activities)*, en dan na die tyd sê hy vir my hy's verskriklik jammer dat dit gebeur het, dit sal nie weer gebeur nie...*
>
> *Liesel: Ek en hy was op 'n stadium saam by 'n sielkundige gewees, uhm, want ek het dit gehaat om in, om intiem te verkeer en daai vooraf "foreplay" en daai tipe goed. Dit was vir my baie erg. So waaroor dit vir my gegaan het, is doen die ding, kry dit klaar, en, kry dit oor en verby wees...So, ja. En dit was vir hom sleg, want ek dink hy't op 'n stadium gevoel ek stoot hom weg. En dit het nie oor hom gegaan nie. So ja, ek weet nie hoe voel Corne daaroor nie.*
>
> *Corne: ....Nee ag dis, ek weet nie, dis. Ek was nooit regtig deel van die gesprekke gewees wat Liesel gehad het met die sielkundiges en so nie, so, ek meen ek kon net gesien het wat die impak is op ons huwelikslewe, so.*

As discussed in the previous theme, even after being informed of the fact that Liesel's childhood sexual abuse was mainly based on bondage type sexual activities, Corne continued to expect Liesel to engage in these activities with him. In as much as their sexual pattern had up to this point been characterised by insensitivity towards one another's needs, his continuing to pursue these activities in their sexual relationship despite knowing her history, shows profound disregard, disrespect and a lack of care for her needs, experiences and also ultimately her well-being.

> *Liesel: Ja, en ek dink Corne het in elk geval geweet hoe ek voel, omdat soortgelyke goed met die molestering en alles plaasgevind het. So, dit het vir my gevoel van hy sit my terug in dieselfde situasie waarin ek was. So, Corne het presies geweet hoe ek daaroor voel. Maar, uhm, dan sê hy vir my: "Maar dit gaan nie daaroor nie. Dit is 'n fantasie wat ek het". Dan sê ek: "Ek hoor wat jy sê, maar dis nie vir my lekker nie". Uhm, en ek het op 'n stadium net begin afskakel. En gesê, "fine", as dit is wat jy wil doen, doen dit. Uhm, ek gaan net nie daar wees nie...*

From the above quotation it is clear that Liesel and Corne held very different perspectives of how they related sexually. From Corne's viewpoint they were acting out a sexual fantasy; however, from Liesel's perspective every sexual encounter where these activities were included was, at the very least, a situation that triggered memories about her childhood sexual abuse, and at worst a source of re-traumatisation. Although the couple initially attempted to discuss the issue, this was done in accordance with their patterns of superficial interaction and avoidance, and there was no attempt to really engage in a conversation where they could consider alternatives, learn more about one another's

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experiences, needs or desires, or make any attempt to explore what would be mutually satisfying and helpful for them as a couple. In addition, it also seems that the couple, over time, began to collude in minimising their discomfort, ambivalence and distress with their sexual pattern, by downplaying their different perspectives and experiences as a mere difference in preference. Thus, it seems the couple got stuck in a struggle or battle of needs and perspectives, and that they cannot step out of this struggle long enough to explore or find an alternative which may be mutually satisfying to both.

> *Corne: Die seksuele deel van ons verhouding is nie altyd lekker vir altwee van ons nie omrede ons albei ander gedagtes het oor wat ons wil doen, wat ons van mekaar verwag.*
>
> *Liesel:* (Lag) *Daar is ander goed ook. Nee, ja daar is ander goed wat Corne geniet wat, wat vir hom belangrik is en wat vir hom 'n "kick" is en dit is nie noodwendig dat ek altyd daarvan hou nie. So, dit maak dit baie moeilik, uhm. Ek dink nie ons het regtig by 'n punt gekom wat, wat hy kan sê: "Wow, weet jy, hierdie werk vir my. Ek hou daarvan" EN dat ek dieselfde kan sê nie.*

Furthermore, as it increasingly became clear that conversation regarding their sexual problems was not conducive to finding a solution and also threatened their system's stability, the couple settled on an implicit compromise or solution. In this regard, they developed a pattern of infrequent sexual interaction limited to Corne's preference for bondage type sexual activities. In this way, Corne's needs in terms of his fantasy were slightly met, even though this was a re-traumatising experience for Liesel. Although Liesel engaged in these activities, she did so by dissociating, which meant that although Corne was able to act out his fantasy, Liesel was not "there", and therefore it is likely that his needs and desires were also frustrated.

Liesel frequently throughout the years attempted to raise her concern and discomfort with their sexual activities, but these attempts continued to be ineffective. Following her objections, Corne would withdraw from Liesel in terms of all physical contact, thereby manoeuvring for the re-establishment of their sexual pattern. Liesel would then set aside her objections and occasionally engage in these sexual activities as a way of also satisfying some of her needs in terms of maintaining and ensuring some sense of connectedness and non-sexual physical closeness. Yet, for her, to have these needs met to some extent, came at an enormous cost to her well-being.

> *Liesel: Ja…en partykeer voel ek moet ek dit op daai manier doen om hom tevrede te hou? Of moet ek dit heeltemal los? Want los jy dit heeltemal, dan gebeur daar niks. Dan dryf mens net al hoe verder uit mekaar uit. Maar aan die anderkant voel ek weer, doen ek dit op sy manier, dan, dan…een van ons twee gaan in elk geval uit "lose". Want dit is nie vir my lekker nie. Ek wil betrokke wees in die situasie en ek wil aan hom kan vat, en ek wil vir hom kan sê "Ek is lief vir jou".*

From the above it is clear that this implicit compromise or solution was a lose-lose situation. Furthermore, from a systemic perspective, all behaviour in a system fits together and is functional for that system, for as long as no pathology or symptoms exist. However, in the presence of symptoms or pathology, one must consider the possibility that some of the behaviours within the system are dysfunctional (Keeney, 1983). Over the duration of the couple's marriage Liesel presented with self-mutilating behaviour, severe depression as well as frequent, and on one occasion near-fatal, suicide attempts. Although the self-mutilating and suicidal behaviours did not manifest for the first time during their marriage, the fact that the same behaviours had manifested when she was sexually abused as a child may be significant. During their marriage, these symptomatic behaviours also increased in severity and frequency. Given the presence, as well as the exacerbation of these symptoms, one may hypothesise that some behaviours within the couple's relationship are dysfunctional. Considering Liesel's distress about Corne's preference for bondage sexual activities and his insistence that these activities be part of their sexual interactions, her dissociative behaviours during their sexual encounters, and the couple's ambivalence, distress and conflict about these sexual activities and intimacy in general, one could furthermore hypothesise that the couple's implicit compromise regarding these activities is part of these dysfunctional behaviours.

In addition, from the information provided by Liesel during the individual interview, it was evident that Corne's preference for these activities impacts not only on his relationship with her, but has on occasion led to his daughters' accidental exposure to bondage type pornographic material stored on a computer. Liesel protected Corne by telling them the material had landed on the computer accidentally and stated that their father was in all likelihood not aware that it was on the computer. Liesel reported that both Christelle and Melinda were extremely shocked by the nature of this material. The distressing interpersonal impact of his sexual fantasies also means that within the context of the couple's relationship and their family system, this behaviour is dysfunctional.

Systemically speaking, the above implicit compromise or solution eventually became part of the couple's intimacy problems, as it maintained and supported the initial issue and also blocked the emergence of alternative solutions. In addition, the couple's initial difficulty and their solution for this difficulty have developed into a rigid, predictable and redundant behavioural sequence around their sexual interactions: namely the couple infrequently engages in sexual intercourse based on bondage type sexual activities; afterwards, Corne feels guilty, apologises to Liesel and promises that it will not happen again; she accepts his apology, until it occurs again upon which the sequence is repeated. Eventually, Liesel moved from accepting his apologies, to commenting on its meaninglessness for her.

Although this presented a change in the sequence, this was a first order change, as the sequence itself was not altered.

> *Liesel: ...En dan gebeur dit, en dan na die tyd sê hy vir my hy's verskriklik jammer dat dit gebeur het, dit sal nie weer gebeur nie. En more, oormore, dan gebeur presies dieselfde en na die tyd, dan's hy weer jammer daaroor en dan is dit "fine" en dan gaan ons maar net weer aan. Uhm, so ek het op 'n stadium gekom wat ek gesê het: "Weet jy, dis 'fine'. Moenie eers vir my sê jy's jammer nie, want jou jammer beteken nie regtig van jy's jammer nie".*

From a systemic perspective it also seems that the tight interlocking of the problem and solution (the implicit compromise) serves as a homeostatic element within their system, stabilising tension, anxiety and conflict regarding their sexual activities in particular, and intimacy, closeness and connectedness in general. In this regard, it seems that anxieties and tension regarding the way they related sexually were regulated by a low frequency of sexual interaction, thereby limiting and containing the potential destabilising impact of these activities. On the other hand, the anxieties and tension regarding distance, disconnectedness and unmet intimacy needs that escalated during extended periods of no sexual intimacy were corrected for and restabilised, with occasional sexual interaction being limited to bondage type activities. In this way, some of the couple's sexual and non-sexual intimacy needs were met, albeit in a dysfunctional manner. Furthermore, in a relationship where both partners are uncomfortable with and ambivalent about closeness and too much togetherness this problem, its solution and its homeostasis paradoxically served to maintain some level of connectedness, while also maintaining a definite distance between them.

Liesel being raped is likely to have resonated strongly with various patterns and events in the couple's relationship. It is likely that the rape, as sexual trauma, brought to the fore painful and traumatic memories of their respective sexual trauma histories. As the couple had dealt with these emotions and the sharing of these events in an avoidant, unsupportive and disrespectful manner in the past, the prominence of memories about these traumas probably brought to the fore their negative experiences with sharing as well, thereby amplifying and confounding the intensity of the couple's emotions in the post-rape context. It is also likely that the rape in some respects resonated with the couple's already contentious sexual pattern and activities and especially with Liesel's discomfort about the lack of control and tenderness inherent in and typical of bondage activities.

The rape's resonance with their dysfunctional sexual and intimacy patterns represented a serious threat to the couple system's homeostasis and ultimately its identity. This is especially so, considering the abovementioned homeostatic function of their sexual and intimacy patterns within the system, and the

fact that, in the absence of other more appropriate patterns and skills, this was the only way for the couple to meet some of their intimacy needs and to keep their relational distance and disconnectedness within specific parameters. This threat was exacerbated by the fact that rape tends to create a context which requires the negotiation of a different sexual pattern in couples' relationships (Barnes, 1995; Miller et al., 1982; Miller & Sutherland, 1999). However, as was evident from the above discussion, the couple had a proven history of inability to negotiate about this aspect of their relationship and also an inability to change it. Given the severity of this threat, their inability to change and to meet the demands the rape posed on their sexual and intimacy pattern, and in the absence of alternative coping skills, the couple dealt with the rape in accordance with their predominant patterns of avoidance and individual autonomy.

> *Liesel: Uhm, so ja, ons, ek dink die voorval het gebeur en dis half asof...jy dit in aanhalingstekens agter jou probeer sit het en net aangegaan het.*

The couple's avoidance of the rape is especially evident in the fact that, other than a decline in the frequency of sexual contact, they did not alter the way they interacted sexually with one another in any way in order to provide for or adjust to the rape. Their avoidance of the rape is furthermore apparent in their lack of awareness or consideration of one another's experience of their first sexual encounter after the rape. It is possible to hypothesise that, only by ignoring the impact of the rape on them individually and on their relationship, were the couple able to maintain their sexual and intimacy patterns, and therefore also the homeostasis of their system, in the post-rape context. This in turn protected their system's identity and ultimately its survival in the aftermath of the rape.

> *Corne: Weereens, Liesel het nog nooit van seksuele intimiteit regtig gehou nie, en derhalwe kan ek nie sê dat dit vir my enigsens 'n ander ervaring was nie. Dis nie iets wat regtig baie in ons huwelik gebeur het nie.*
>
> *Navorser* (aan Liesel)*: ...Gewoonlik vind paartjies die eerste seksueel intieme interaksie na 'n verkragting moeilik. Wat het met julle gebeur, hoe was julle ervaring van daardie eerste keer?*
>
> *Liesel: Afgesny* (lag) *uitgeblok* (lag) *kry dit so vinnig as moontlik agter die rug* (lag)*...*
>
> *Navorser* (aan Liesel)*: So, vir jou het jy teruggeval op die patroon om nie daar te wees nie...Wat wat jou ervaring van Corne?*
>
> *Liesel: ...Uhm, weet jy Corne is meer van, hy hou daarvan om bietjie meer, hoe kan ek sê, bietjie meer van "foreplay" te hê en eers sulke goeters te doen, voordat dit oorgaan na die res van die storie toe. Uhm, so, en, ek weet nie...*

However, from the individual interview with Liesel, it became apparent that in the long term, the rape and the manner in which the couple handled it became information that fed back into their relationship,

contributing to certain shifts in how they dealt with their intimacy problems. In this regard, Liesel became more aware of her role as victim and became more adamant about the fact that she wanted their sexual pattern to change to one that is more inclusive, mutual, caring and considerate. In addition, it seems that some information entering their system from the outside, added to the momentum of these shifts. In this regard, Liesel's therapy seems to have furthermore amplified her ambivalence about the couple's sexual activities and her role in their relationship in a way which resonated strongly with the rape.

> Liesel: …Want die sielkundige het een keer…toe sê sy vir my: "Weet jy wat, hierdie goed wat Corne met jou doen, is op die ou einde eintlik van tipe van verkragting wat hy doen. Want jy's nie in beheer van die situasie nie. Jy kan nie jouself help nie. Jy's nie deel van die situasie nie. So, hy maak met jou net wat hy wil, uhm, en na die tyd dan, dan is hy 'happy'. En jy is sielsongelukkig daaroor". Toe sê ek vir haar: "Ek weet"…
> Navorser: …Jy sien dit dan ook so?
> Liesel: Ja…want dit is eintlik.

It also appears that in combination with various other factors, such as the couple's longstanding relational difficulties, increasing distance and disconnectedness as well as financial problems, the above shifts triggered a positive feedback cycle which, at the time of the individual interview, manifested in the complete breakdown of the redundant and rigid behavioural sequence surrounding sexual and non-sexual intimacy in their relationship. Part of this positive feedback cycle is Liesel's decision no longer to engage in these activities with Corne, to which he responded by withdrawing all physical intimacy, including non-sexual closeness and contact. It seems that with these new behaviours, and the breakdown of the homeostatic behavioural sequence, their relational disconnectedness and distance have escalated far beyond the parameters acceptable to their system. This escalation can also no longer be effectively contained by their usual superficial countermanoeuvres, such as going to church-based seminars or camps. Essentially, it seems the couple's system is breaking apart.

> Liesel: …Uhm, so ja, dis partykeer die heeltyd hierdie ge-"battle" tussen jouself van wat is reg en wat is verkeerd? Gaan jy op die ou einde van die dag vir jou man toegee en sê dis "fine"? Ek sal dit doen soos wat jy dit doen net om weer bymekaar te wees. Of gaan jy vir jouself opstaan en sê: Weet jy, dis nie vir my aanvaarbaar nie. As jy dit nie op 'n ander manier kan doen wat meer gemaklik is met my nie, maar ook met jou nie, uhm, dan gebeur daar maar niks nie. Dan gaan dit maar vir die res van ons lewe so aankarring. Uhm, so dis baie moeilik, hoor.

6.4.3 Relationship control as self-preservation

From Liesel and Corne's account and their interaction during the interviews it became apparent that their relationship is not clearly defined. In this regard there is no mutually satisfying agreement in terms of the type of behaviours (complementary, symmetrical or parallel) that are predominantly to take place between them, who takes control of what area of their relationship, who makes these decisions and how these decisions are made. This manifests in a constant struggle between them for control of their relationship definition and for the dominant position in their relationship. This struggle was also evident during the interviews, and was at times open and at other times more subtle and subdued.

As this ongoing struggle for position, power and control presents a constant threat to their system's homeostasis, they have over the years come to contain this threat by dealing with their struggle in accordance with entrenched patterns of avoidance, individual autonomy and non-discussion of relational issues. This culminated in a relational context where both of them basically "do their own thing", by focusing on their respective roles as financial provider and child carer. Although they declare to do this under the banner of teamwork it was clear that this teamwork only extends to superficial everyday routine and pragmatics, such as doing the dishes, washing and cooking. In respect of the more complex aspects of their respective roles and responsibilities as financial provider and child carer, the struggle over who decides how these are performed, how much support is offered, received or required or how involved each of them should be in the other's roles and responsibilities, remains. In this regard, Liesel came across as resentful and frustrated with the fact that Corne spends very little time with her and the children, and that the majority of his time is spent either in front of the computer or at work. Similarly, although Corne did not directly voice his dissatisfaction with his role as the only breadwinner, he did come across as frustrated and resentful towards Liesel for not lightening the load in that regard.

When one considers other relational processes and areas, the struggle for control of their relationship definition is also evident. In the parental subsystem this seems to play out in an ongoing struggle about how to parent, who disciplines the children and how the children are to be disciplined, and especially about who makes these decisions.

> *Corne: Ja, ek dink, ek meen, hulle leer nie verantwoordelikheid aan as mens dit vir hulle doen heeltyd nie. Uhm, iewers moet hulle dit begin doen, en ek meen, dis, daar's nie 'n beter tyd as nou nie, so. En ek meen, uhm, as sy "moan" dat sy niks gedoen kry nie omdat sy heeltyd besig*

is…ek was my hande in onskuld, want dit is nie hoe ek, uh, ek wil hê sy moet doen nie, en as sy dit wil doen, dan's dit nou maar haar sk…besigheid.

Liesel: … As Corne met die kinders raas, dan, dan is ek half opstandig. Want hoekom moet jy met julle raas? Wie gee jou die reg om met hulle te raas? Terwyl as ek dieselfde doen, dan is dit "fine". En, en dit werk nie so nie. …En ek voel net, vir 'n baie lang tyd was Corne, in aanhalingstekens, nie deel van die gesin nie. En moes ek aan die hoof staan daarvan, ek moes dissipline toepas, ek moes raas met die kinders, ek moet hulle in die bed sit…En ek voel net, ja, Corne is baie besig, maar ek voel wanneer hy by die huis is, moet hy ook partykeer daai verantwoordelikheid vat…

From the above it seems that their differences in terms of parenting do not merely relate to differences in viewpoints or approaches, but rather appear to be part of the larger struggle to determine and define their respective positions in the parental subsystem, the division of childcare responsibilities and their relationship as parents. It is likely that this makes for a very unstable parental alliance which the children use to their advantage.

Furthermore, the impact of the above struggle on their relationship is that there is little synchronisation or harmony in their interactions as they constantly manoeuvre and countermanoeuvre for control with both of them continuously suggesting, commanding or requesting, on covert and overt levels, that the other person behaves in a certain way. This impacts on the support they offer one another, and it became evident during the interviews that they, at times, not only fail to provide support for each other in terms of their respective roles and responsibilities, but that they often undermine one another's position or efforts to effectively fulfill his or her role in both the couple and parental subsystem.

It seems that from the beginning of their relationship, the couple was obliged to deal with distressing circumstances and events which complicated their efforts to negotiate and define their roles towards one another. In this regard, the couple initially related to one another in terms of a rescuer-victim dynamic, where Corne seemingly occupied the one-up position in his role as rescuer and Liesel fulfilled the role of the victim needing to be rescued. These roles already emerged before their marriage when, as discussed in their background, Corne paid for the psychological assessment which in the end provided confirmation of Liesel's childhood sexual abuse to her family. In this way he rescued Liesel from their judgement of her as having a "double personality". He furthermore provided financial support for her to enter into therapy for treatment of the childhood abuse.

It appears that the couple never adjusted these roles when they were married, and that they continued to relate to one another as rescuer and victim. Thus, their role repertoires as partners, or husband and wife,

became organised in accordance with this dynamic, generalising the resuer and victim roles to other contexts. During the joint interviews Liesel and Corne described their functioning as a couple, in terms of what on the surface appears to be a typical rescuer-victim dynamic. It was evident that Corne continuously came to Liesel's rescue in various ways over the years, such as paying huge amounts for doctors' and psychologists' fees, rushing to her side following various suicide attempts, or dealing with other crises related to Liesel. Liesel came across as admiring and highly appreciative of Corne, for what he reportedly did for her over the years, and in some ways seemed to relish the victim role in this regard.

> *Liesel: Weet jy, ek wil net dit vir jou sê, Marina* (referring to the researcher)*, ek dink dis baie, baie, as daar baie is, ek dink dis bitter min mans wat 'n pad sal stap soos wat Corne saam met my gestap het. En nog steeds by sy vrou bly. Ek erken, ek erken dit ten volle, uhm, ek het baie keer…foute gemaak. Dinge gedoen wat ek nie moes doen nie, soos die selfmoord en sulke goed. Ek het Corne in situasies geplaas waar dit vir hom geweldig moeilik was. Ek meen, hulle het by die hospitaal gesê hulle behandel my nie voordat hy nie R5000 of R6000 neersit nie. Uhm, so ewe skielik, êrens moet hy daai geld kry. En dan…*
>
> *Corne: Wel, dit was of dit, of sy was na 'n staatshospitaal toe.*
>
> *Liesel: Verstaan jy? Uhm, so ek erken ek het Corne in geweldige moeilike situasies al geplaas. So, in daai opsig kan ek alle eer aan my man gee, dat hy nog steeds deur, deur alles en so aan, nog steeds by ons as gesin gebly het…Uhm, ja, ek dink, ek wil dit net vir Corne sê, want hy's "amazing" in daai opsig. Ek, ek dink as dit ander mans was, het hulle lankal die pad gevat. En ek's eerlik met jou. Ek meen, dis nie maklik as iemand jou oor die selfoon bel en sê: "Meneer, jou vrou het probeer selfmoord pleeg nie en sy's kritiek", of "whatever"…* (Corne begin praat)
>
> *Corne: Dis nie een keer wat ek gejaag het oor goed wat sy gedoen het nie.*
>
> *Liesel: Ja.*
>
> *Corne: Weet, wat ek by die werk is wat ek skielik in my kar moet klim en jaag.*
>
> *Liesel: Ja.*
>
> *Corne: Weet, wat ek gebel word en sê, jy weet, daar's weer drama, daar's weer drama en daar's weer drama. 'n Pêl van my het gesê hy sou al lankal sy goed gevat en geloop het.*

However, from their written reflections and the individual interview with Liesel, it became apparent that the above rescuer-victim dynamic represents just one arch of a larger relational pattern which also includes a victimiser-victim dynamic. It furthermore seems that the rescuer-victim dynamic comprises the acceptable part of this larger pattern and also represents the mask which the couple presents to outsiders in order to camouflage the more troubling and distressing victimiser-victim dynamic. This dynamic only emerged after the couple married and first manifested in the context of the couple's

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dysfunctional sexual pattern discussed in previous themes. In this regard, Liesel experienced their sexual activities as placing her back in the abusive context and in this way Corne, in addition to being Liesel's rescuer, also became her victimiser, while Liesel's role as victim was further entrenched. It is also likely that the emergence of the victimiser-victim dynamic furthermore restricted the couple's options for defining their roles towards one another in more appropriate and functional ways.

In the discussion of the previous theme, the couple's anxiety, discomfort and ambivalence with closeness, with sharing their experiences, needs and desires with one another and their difficulties with sexual and non-sexual intimacy became evident. It may be that, early on in their relationship, in the absence of other more appropriate skills, roles and patterns, the rescuer-victim and victimiser-victim dynamics and roles were the only way the couple could potentially deal with the above difficulties. Over time these dynamics and roles became the predominant way of regulating the extent and type of their involvement with and closeness to one another. Furthermore, central to these dynamics and roles are issues of power and control (Balcom, 1996). The prominence of these dynamics and roles, and the absence of alternatives, meant that the couple, over time, began to regulate their struggle for control of the relationship definition and for what would happen between them, for control of system resources such as support, care and nurturance and for having their individual needs met, through these roles and dynamics.

When one considers the rescuer-victim and victimiser-victim dynamics in the couple's relationship, it is evident that these dynamics are closely intertwined and that they continuously feed into each other, maintaining both dynamics and therefore also Liesel and Corne's respective roles. Given the circularity of these dynamics and of systems in general, the point from where the researcher chose to describe the larger pattern is arbitrary and not a reflection of a linear process where one dynamic causes the other. Furthermore, consideration of how these dynamics are interlocked makes evident the complexities of control and power issues in this couple's relationship. In this regard, one would expect that Liesel, given her entrenched victim role, does not wield much power or control in terms of what happens in their relationship. However, when one examines the interpersonal and relational impact of their behaviour within each dynamic, as well as the larger circular pattern between these two dynamics, it becomes possible to see that deciding who is in control of their relationship definition, or who is in control of what happens between them and in the different areas of their relationship, is not that simple.

When punctuating or describing from the victimiser-victim dynamic, Liesel's one-down position and Corne's control over what happens between them seem clearer. This is most evident in the sexual context, where the couple engages in bondage type sexual activities with Corne in the controlling

position. Liesel finds her extreme submissive position in this context distressing and re-traumatising. She feels that she is once again placed in a position where she does not have a choice, or control and she also feels victimised. In turn, the victimiser role affords Corne the one-up position from where he can get his sexual needs and desires met.

Her position as victim in the sexual context has on occasion extended into the parental subsystem. As discussed in the previous theme, the couple's daugthers were accidentally exposed to pornographic material, including material involving Liesel, which Corne stored on his computer. When Liesel related these incidents to the researcher, it was evident that Corne's behaviour had the impact of victimising her even further as she felt exposed, felt she had no control over what was happening to her or how and what was exposed. Furthermore, it placed her in an extremely difficult and embarrassing position with the children where she had no choice but to make up stories to cover for Corne, in order to protect his image and position in the children's eyes, while her own image and position were seriously damaged.

> *Liesel: ...En sy kom by my en sy sê vir my: "Mamma, daar's iets wat ek vir Mamma wil wys", nê. Ek sê vir haar: "OK"...En sy sê: "Maar Mamma moet saam met my na Pappa se rekenaar toe kom"...Sy weet PRESIES waar om in te gaan om weer by daai video uit te kom en sy wys vir my en ek sê net: "OK". En sy sê vir my: "Mamma, hoekom het Pappa dit gedoen?" Nou moet ek vir my kind verduidelik van wat daar aangaan, hoekom het haar pa dit gedoen en alles. En, uhm, ek was baie kwaad vir Corne omdat hy my in die eerste plek in daai situasie geplaas het, want dis nie iets wat jy kan wegneem nie. En daai aand toe konfronteer ek hom. Toe sê ek: "Hoekom het jy dit in die eerste plek op jou rekenaar gesit?" Toe sê hy vir my: "Ag man", hy sal dit nou dadelik gaan "delete". Toe sê ek: "Corne, jy verstaan nie. Christelle het klaar gesien. Ek moes klaar vir haar probeer 'n storie uitdink van wat gaan hier aan"...Dis nie van ag ek "erase" dit gou vanaand uit haar kop uit en sy vergeet daarvan nie. En, dieselfde het met Melinda gebeur. Wat Corne pornografie op sy rekenaar gehad het en wat sy daarop afgekom het...Toe moet ek my kind gaan verduidelik wat gaan hier aan* (harder, ontsteld). *Toe sê ek vir hom: "Hemel Corne!" Weet, dan's dit van: "Ag, ek sal dit afhaal". Maar hy verstaan nie die impak wat dit op die kinders het nie. En elke keer is dit EK wat die situasie moet gaan probeer red...Om vir HOM te "cover".* (sug)

In this dynamic and these contexts, Liesel's role and position as victim are made even worse by the fact that she cannot really address or comment on his control and the impact his behaviour has, as Corne deals with these comments and concerns by denying the victimiser role and the impact of his behaviour on her and the children. In this regard, he denies the re-traumatising impact of the bondage activities by disregarding her experience and concerns and focusing on his experience and perspective of these

activities as acting out a fantasy. He also minimises their sexual difficulties and defines these as a mere difference in preference and ideas about what is acceptable and what not. He furthermore either denies or minimises the impact of the children's exposure to the pornographic material, as well as the position it placed her in. In the victimiser-victim dynamic Corne's denial and minimisation are in themselves part of the victimisation.

This victimiser-victim dynamic and related control issues are not limited to the sexual context and are evident in other contexts, albeit in subtler ways. In this regard, Corne has over the years been increasingly less available to, and has withdrawn from, Liesel in various ways. This seems to be partly due to work-related requirements as well as the couple's financial and relational difficulties. However, the time which the couple could potentially spend together, Corne instead spends in front of his computer, or television. Alternatively he distances himself from her manoeuvres for closeness by rebuffing her either verbally or non-verbally. This simultaneously maintains and fits with the couple's pattern of avoidance of relational problems and issues. Thus, although his avoidance of closeness with Liesel seemingly satisfies his personal needs in terms of distance, her needs in terms of closeness are not met. The impact of this on Liesel is that she feels extremely isolated and lonely in their relationship, with which she deals by seeking closeness and company from family, friends and acquaintances, discussing some of the couple's problems with people outside of their relationship. During the joint interviews it was apparent that Corne perceived Liesel as sharing personal and sensitive information indiscriminately and that he does not at all approve of her sharing this with other people. Yet, during the individual interview with Liesel it became apparent that Corne also discusses their problems and shares private information with people outside of their relationship, such as close friends, but that this is acceptable to him.

> Liesel: ...en die vriendin saam met wie ek hierdie naweek op die kamp was, uhm, kon ek aflei van Corne gesels met hulle oor sekere goed. Want...sy praat goeters, dan lei ek af: maar my maggies, Corne het met haar gepraat daaroor. Of, jy weet, die manier wat sy praat, kom ek agter van, OK, Corne het dit vir haar vertel. OK, Corne het vir haar gesê ek is so en so en so, uhm, so ja, dan besef ek maar hy praat ook...Onthou jy toe jy nou die dag hier was, toe gooi hy dit teen my kop dat ek met ander mense daaroor praat en hy's ongelukkig daaroor? Maar hy doen PRESIES dieselfde! Uhm, so ja, dan voel ek half van, maar dis onregverdig, want hy praat met ander mense. Maar ek mag nie met mense praat nie.

From the above it is clear that the victimiser-victim dynamic provides Corne with a one-up position in their relationship from where he can at times control what happens between them and from where his

needs can be met, without having to acknowledge or attend to Liesel's needs. However, when one describes their relationship in terms of the rescuer-victim dynamic another picture emerges.

When punctuating from the latter dynamic Corne, at first glance, again seems to be in control as he takes the lead and rescues Liesel in various ways, such as managing the majority of responsibilities during crisis situations, financially ensuring she accesses medical services when needed and taking on the sole responsibility of providing financially for the family. However, when one considers the impact of Liesel's behaviours on his choices and behaviour, it becomes evident that, in his role as rescuer, Corne is not so much in control of what happens between them. This is especially evident when the cycles associated with Liesel's suicide attempts are considered. When viewed in the context of Corne's ever-increasing involvement at work, time spent away from the family and his withdrawal from Liesel, and of how these suicide attempts force him to abandon his work, to rush to her side and be involved with her, it becomes possible to perceive how, through these behaviours, she covertly manoeuvres to circumscribe his behaviour and to control what happens between them. During these periods not only is the way he spends his time determined by her behaviour, but her suicidal attempts have on occasion also determined how the family's hard-earned income was spent because, according to the couple, the private hospital demanded upfront cash payment before any services were rendered.

In a relational context where Corne is increasingly unavailable, where intimacy and closeness are wrought with anxiety and tension and where considerate and containing mutual care and nurturance are absent, these suicide attempts and the pattern around them may function to meet some of Liesel's needs in terms of involvement, closeness, support and care from Corne. Furthermore, they may also represent a means of having these needs met, without being obliged to submit to his control. However, her control in these contexts is simultaneously denied as her history, problems and loneliness "cause" her to be depressed and "cause" her to "not cope" and to attempt to commit suicide. Thus, Corne is placed in a situation where he cannot really comment on her control and the impact her behaviour has on him, as this control defies verbal expression and such comments would also violate his role as rescuer.

Closely linked to the above is his rescuing her by providing the financial support for her to enter therapy. Although it may seem that because he does so he is in control, it became apparent that he is only sent the accounts which he then has to settle. Thus, in this way she once again seemingly decides how part of their limited income is spent. This furthermore places additional strain on Corne as the sole financial provider and even determines how Corne's time is spent as it seems that the medical expenses may also require him to put in additional working hours in order to make ends meet. One could also

hypothesise that this may be another way for Liesel to meet her needs in terms of support, care and nurturance from Corne.

> *Corne: ...Maar sy het nooit regtig met my gedeel en sulke goed nie, so. Uhm, en ek het gewerk, jy weet, want die mediese rekeninge het maar gekom, so. Dit is maar bietjie duur, uhg......*
>
> *Corne: ...Ek meen, ek het duisende rande aan sielkundige onkostes gehad. Van Liesel se situasies. Ek het nie daai tipe finansies nie.*

This rescuer-victim dynamic has been generalised more subtly to other contexts as well. In this regard, Corne's position as the sole financial provider of the family is a responsibility which he seemingly assumed, and maintains, of his own volition. However, during the second interview the couple related an incident where Liesel had basically secured a position at a pre-primary school. After doing so, she disclosed her suicidal thoughts to a person whom she regarded as a friend. However, this friend also had close contact with the school headmistress and subsequently, out of concern, made the information available to the latter, who then called Liesel in and withdrew the offer of employment the day before she was to commence duty, based on the headmistress's concerns that Liesel was not "emotionally ready" to work with pre-primary children. Thus, it would appear that Liesel, knowingly or unknowingly, self-sabotaged an opportunity for employment which would have secured a much needed second source of income for the couple. It is also apparent that Corne's position as sole financial provider and the pressure he is under in this respect may not be something that he controls at all. In addition, through this behaviour Liesel sabotaged an opportunity to escape or alleviate her isolation as a stay-at-home-mother and also maintained her financial dependency on Corne, thereby maintaining her role as a victim who needs to be rescued.

> *Liesel: ...Ja, daar het mense my in my rug gesteek, dit het ons seergemaak, uhm, maar ek voel ook, uhm, soos daai werk wat ek verloor het. Ek voel dit was regtig onregverdig gewees. Die persoon het my nie eers geweet, geken nie. Uhm, sy't nie vir my kans gegee om myself te bewys nie...So, daar voel ek, uhm, dit was onregverdig van haar om te gaan op wat mense vir haar vertel het...Kom ek daarso, uhm, toe kom dit daarop neer van, nee, maar, uhm, sy voel nou dis ek kan nie daar werk en so aan nie. Toe sê ek "Wat het verander?" Toe sê sy ja maar hierdie persoon het vir haar gesê, uhm, sy dink ek is emosioneel nie gereed om met kinders te werk nie...Uhm, ek voel van, uhm, sy kon my op 'n 3 maande basis aangestel het om te kyk hoe hanteer ek die kinders...Uhm, maar dit het nie gebeur nie....Uhm, maar dit kom daarop neer van die goed was klaar in plek.*

Their struggle for control is furthermore confounded by the fact that these dynamics and their roles feed into one another and that they therefore paradoxically maintain one another's and their own roles

and positions in the larger circular pattern. In this way the struggle for control becomes a never-ending endeavour. In this regard, the more the couple engages with one another in accordance with their victimiser and victim roles where Corne has control the more Liesel's victim role is entrenched. In turn, the more she becomes the victim, the more she needs rescuing which maintains Corne's position and role as rescuer as well as her covert control. Thus, by victimising her, he in some ways maintains her covert control. In turn Liesel, through suicidal and self-mutilating behaviour as well as occasional self-sabotaging behaviour as discussed above, maintains Corne's rescuing behaviours and also contributes to the entrenchment of her position as victim.

Given the nature and degree of Liesel and Corne's relational difficulties, rape was probably the trauma with the most potential for profoundly disrupting and threatening an already extremely vulnerable and volatile system. In this regard, rape conjures up strong feelings and differences of opinion regarding its nature as either a sexually motivated crime or a crime motivated by power, control and aggression, or perhaps both (Archer & Vaughan, 2001; Groth, et al., 1977). One can hypothesise that Liesel being raped, and the above prominent discourses about rape, resonated strongly with the pre-existing roles, dynamics, ambivalence and tension in their relationship, and especially with the tension and ambivalence about their sexual and intimacy pattern, the inherent unbalanced control and lack of tenderness in bondage sexual activities together with how these activities may resemble some of the aspects of rape. Furthermore, the fact that Corne was well aware that Liesel found these activities re-traumatising, in all likelihood served to exacerbate this tension and ambivalence, owing to the fact that the rape not only illuminated Liesel's role as victim, but also conversely Corne's role as victimiser in how they related sexually.

Since the couple's role repertoire was, with the exception of their roles as financial provider and child carer, limited to those of victimiser, rescuer and victim, it is likely that the rape's resonance with and illumination of the victimising dynamics of their relationship were fundamentally destabilising and threatening to their system. One can also hypothesise that, since these roles and dynamics were also the ways in which both Liesel and Corne had some of their individual needs met, albeit dysfunctionally, this furthermore added to the threat the rape represented to their system's survival. The couple's initial response to the rape, as well as their continued avoidance and minimisation of all rape-related subjects or discussions may not only have been part of their system's entrenched patterns of avoidance, of an individualised approach to problems or an indication of their disconnectedness or disengagement as a couple, but may have very well been their system's way of ensuring survival.

However, over time the rape's resonance with their relational patterns of victimisation, and especially Liesel's role as victim, continued to reverberate throughout their system, increasingly illuminating these patterns, roles and dynamics. It also seems that Liesel has finally reached a point where she acknowledges her victim role, and also that she is now manoeuvring to define her role and position in their relationship differently. This appears to be the culmination of various processes, events and circumstances, and cannot really be linearly ascribed to the rape.

> *Liesel: ...Dis, dis net wat ek kan sê, want ek het tot op 'n punt gekom wat ek gesê het ek wil nie meer 'n "victim" wees nie, ek wil nou 'n "survivor" wees.*

From a systemic perspective, changes in one part of the system alter everything else in the system. Thus, Liesel's defining herself as a survivor will have implications for Corne's roles and position in their relationship, for the way they interact with one another, for how they deal with power and control, and also as regards how their individual needs are met. It seems that Corne is responding to her manoeuvre with a countermanoeuvre which has, in the past, effectively maintained the status quo, and therefore also their roles, in their relationship. At this point in time, he seems to be responding to her manoeuvre in keeping with his role as victimiser. In this regard he punishes her by distancing himself completely and withdrawing from all types of intimacy, knowing full well the distress this brings about for her and that she needs non-physical closeness more than he does.

During the last interview with Liesel, it seemed the struggle for control and for what is to happen between them was balanced on a knife point. Liesel has begun to self-mutilate again, which if escalated according to the couple's usual patterns, may counter the above fluctuation, return their system to its former status quo and maintain the couple's victimiser-victim and rescuer-victim dynamics. However, it seems more likely that the instability in their system may have already escalated beyond the point of no return and that their system is close to breaking down. This is evident in the fact that Corne no longer sleeps in the couple's bedroom and has indicated his intention to leave the marriage as soon as it is financially possible. Furthermore, Liesel having defined herself as a survivor, rather than a victim, may make it impossible for the couple to return to these dynamics and their former roles. In this regard they will never be able to engage in these dynamics and roles again without a conscious awareness of their respective roles as victim and victimiser.

6.4.4 Ineffective communication

The couple's abovementioned difficulties, processes and patterns are maintained by and also maintain their ineffective and rigid communication pattern and rules. In terms of communication rules, the couple seems to have developed an enduring, inflexible and explicit rule regarding relational problems,

concerns, crises and traumas. In this regard, they deal with these events or situations by "not talking" to each other about them. During the individual interview, Liesel remarked that, as a couple, they lacked the knowledge of how to communicate about these events and situations. However, one also has to keep in mind that they have attended various marital seminars, camps as well as therapy over the years, and despite such efforts they could not integrate the information received from these resources, make the necessary adjustments, or evolve the necessary skills and patterns to communicate more effectively. Thus, it is likely that their lack of appropriate and effective communication skills, patterns and rules is maintained by the overall rigidity of their system.

> *Liesel: En ek dink nie een van ons twee weet regtig hoe om dit te hanteer, en hoe om werklik daaroor te praat nie.*

Although both Liesel and Corne are aware of the fact that the "not talking" rule is a significant problem in their relationship, they continue to collude in maintaining the rule through various rationalisations justifying their adherence to this rule. These rationalisations include the following: that the couple does not live in the past, but rather they move on and focus on the future; that there is no sense in discussing trauma or difficult experiences as discussion does not change anything; discussing such events means reliving them; that one needs the luxury of time and money to talk about these extreme experiences and to resolve relationship difficulties; that traumas, extreme stressors and relationship difficulties will magically be resolved if one's religious foundation is in order; and finally that attending to and discussing the children's problems and issues and dealing with the pragmatics of everyday tasks are more important than dealing with their issues and problems as a couple. These rationalisations were echoed repeatedly throughout the joint interviews, often as part of distancing manoeuvres regarding the research topic, and also in discussions of their relationship dynamics.

According to the couple they dealt with the rape in accordance with this "not-talking" rule. As mentioned in an earlier theme, it later became evident that there was one brief discussion about the rape, but that this was superficial, centring on factual details and practicalities, which fitted with the above rationalisation, as well as the relational pattern of attending to the pragmatics of everyday life and crises. However, as mentioned in chapter three, one of the systemic principles holds that one cannot not communicate. Thus, although the couple did not conduct what they considered to be a meaningful discussion about the rape, the way the rape was discussed during this once-off superficial interaction, and the way they avoided any further discussions thereafter, are themselves meaningful communications about the rape, and perhaps more importantly, communications about their relationship. In this regard, their maintaining this "not talking" rule in the face of such a serious trauma

as rape seems to communicate and confirm their distance and profound disconnectedness as a couple, as well as the probability that their relationship is in deep trouble.

> *Corne: Ek kan eerlik waar nie sê dat ek 'n verandering in haar gedrag of haar optrede teenoor my gesien het nie, wat derhalwe beteken vir my is dat voor die verkragting was ons huwelikslewe nie wat dit moes wees nie…*
>
> *Corne: Of die probleme in ons verhouding veroorsaak is deur Liesel se omstandighede, is moeilik om te bepaal want a.g.v. gebrek aan liefde, intimiteit was my aandag elders gevestig. Definitief nie in ander verhoudings nie, maar dinge wat tog ook vir Liesel onaanvaarbaar was en ongemaklik gemaak het.*
>
> *Liesel: So elke dag is dit net ek en my kinders! Die ergste is 'n mens is nie kwaad vir mekaar nie, maar daar is net niks! Ek wou al skei of het gedink daaraan, maar ek is regtig lief vir my man en my kinders!*

Systemically speaking one can hypothesise that, in the context of attempting to deal with the continued disruptive impact of various extreme stressors and traumas, as well as their relational problems, the above "not talking" rule, as well as the rationalisations maintaining it, may have been part of the solutions attempted by the system to stabilise itself in a context that was ever-changing. In other words, the rule and these rationalisations formed part of the system's negative feedback cycles whereby their system re-adjusted to information coming into the system, by ignoring the information, returning to its pre-trauma or pre-stressor state and going on with life as if nothing had happened. However, from the conversations and their written reflections it became clear that, in the long term, rather than stabilising the system and reducing anxiety, the inflexibility of this rule and the inconsistency of these rationalisations continue to feed back into their system in a fashion which increasingly threatens to upset its homeostasis.

From the discussion of the previous themes it was possible to deduce that the couple's collusion in "not talking" about the rape forms part of an overall system pattern of collusion, distance, avoidance and disconnectedness. Thus, although evident during the rape, it was not caused by the rape. However, it is likely that the rape and the way they dealt with it served as a confirmation, and possibly also an exacerbation, of these patterns. This "not talking" rule furthermore contributes to a relational context which is conducive to communication traps. It seems Liesel and Cornen often fall into the trap of mind reading, where they assume they know what the other person is thinking or feeling, or how the other person will behave or respond. In a circular manner their mind reading also appears to maintain the "not talking" rule, as they often make incorrect assumptions, bringing about resentment and feelings of being misunderstood, which in turn alienate them further from one another and make it still less likely

that they will engage in conversation. Given their pattern avoidance of awareness and unconcern with one another's experiences and emotions, one can hypothesise that they will be more likely to make incorrect assumptions.

> *Navorser* (aan Liesel)*: Ek hoor nou jy sê jy hou baie terug, maar ek hoor ook dat dinge partykeer te veel raak vir jou. Wat dink jy is die impak daarvan op Corne en op julle verhouding?*
>
> *Liesel:……………Weet jy, dit is vir my moeilik om te sê, Marina* (referring to the researcher). *Ek weet nie of dit hom regtig pla nie…Want hy's so besig met die werk wat hy moet doen en rekenaar goed, ek dink nie, ek weet nie! Dit is eintlik 'n vraag wat hy vir jou moet antwoord, ek, ek kan nie vir jou sê nie. Sonder om lelik te wees, ek dink nie dit pla Corne nie.*
>
> *Corne:…So, om te sê dit pla my nie, isss…Natuurlik pla dit my dat ons nie kan regtig kommunikeer op die stadium nie. Maar dit help ook nie ek gaan sit stil daaroor nie, want ek het nie nou tyd dat ons daaroor gesels nie. Ek het eerlikwaar nie tyd nie.*

In the context of the rape, both Liesel and Corne again fell into the communication trap of mindreading. As discussed in the first theme, they made certain assumptions in terms of how the other person wanted to deal with the rape, based on their perceptions of each other's behaviours in the post-rape context. Although these assumptions served to ensure their adherence to the "no-talking" rule in the aftermath of the rape, in the context of their overall relationship dynamics, these assumptions also provided convenient justifications for the profound lack of mutual support, care and nurturance during this time, serving as an effective mask for the distance, disconnectedness, and crisis in their relationship.

In addition to the above, it seems the couple's communication often consists of contradictory messages: in other words, where one message is communicated (such as "do it"), and then followed by another message (such as "don't do it") at the same level, as can be noted in the following excerpt:

> *Corne: …Maar, ek meen, sy sal baie keer vir my sê: "PRAAT met die kinders". Jy weet, dan sal ek nou hulle aanvat, en dan's sy kwaad vir my. Weet jy, nou's dit 'n geval van ek mag nie skreeu nie, maar sy mag skreeu. Dis 2 stelle reëls wat geld. Jy weet, nou, en dan sê ek eerder: "Man, as, hanteer jy dit dan! Want jy word kwaad as ek met hulle baklei. Jy sê vir my, weet, ek moet hulle vasvat". En dan foeter ek vir hulle, jy weet, en dan's sy kwaad vir my daaroor. Jy weet en dit issss, dan voel ek net, weet, laat sy dit dan doen.*

Contradictory or double messages were especially evident during the joint interviews. In this regard they maintained throughout much of the second interview that due to time constraints, neither of them

can attend to one another's distress about previous extreme stressors, the rape, or their relational problems, but that they will do so in future. However, when asked to reflect on how the future would be different, both indicated that it would not be.

> *Corne: …Ons sal, ons sal seker die punt moet bereik wat ons gaan sit en op 'n stadium gesels daaroor en goeters. Ek glo net dat 'n mens nie, uh, God wil nie hê 'n mens moet in die verlede leef nie. Hoe sleg of hoe goed dinge ook al is, uhm, die verlede is nie wat saak maak nie.*

Another unexpected, contradictory message relates to one of the rationalisations regarding their "not talking" rule: that it does not help to discuss relational problems or traumas, as talking changes nothing. However, both of them engage in discussions with people external to their system about these very issues. For example, Liesel discusses the couple's previous extreme stressors, the rape, her childhood trauma, as well as their relationship problems with various people. Similarly, Corne also discusses their relational problems with a select few people. Thus, it would seem that this rationalisation applies specifically to their communications with one another. This in turn communicates a great deal about their relationship as a couple. In this regard, in addition to being reflective of the inefficiency of their communication pattern, in other words that their talking with one another does not alleviate their problems, it also seems to reflect the deduction that both of them seek and find comfort, consolation, support and care outside of their relationship. Once again this confirms the distance in their relationship and their disconnectedness as a couple.

> *Liesel: Ja, ja, dis half asof mens makliker met ander mense praat as wat met mekaar self. En, ek meen, dit is op die ou einde van die dag die verkeerdste ding onder die son. As ek die dag "down" is, dan wil ek eintlik vir Corne kan sê: "Weet jy wat, ek voel 'down' vandag en ek regtig af vandag". En ek kan dit nie doen nie. Van, dit is van, as hy by die huis kom, moet jy "fine" wees…*

Furthermore, one of their rationalisations is also seriously contradicted and undermined by the dysfunctionality of their sexual and intimacy patterns. In this regard, one of the rationalisations purports that the couple does not live in the past: they move on and focus on the future. However, Corne's preference for bondage sexual activities, his expectation that Liesel will engage with him in this manner and the traumatic memories triggered through these activities retain Liesel's childhood sexual abuse in the present, making it impossible for her to place the abuse in the past and move on. Furthermore, the couple's communications regarding their sexual difficulties appear to be especially dysfunctional. In this regard, it seems Liesel is placed in a position very similar to the double bind with regards to these issues. During the individual interview Liesel remarked that Corne often sent her sms-messages and wrote her letters to the following effect:

Liesel: ...En hy't al vir my goed gestuur en briefies geskryf van, uhm: "As jy my regtig lief het, dan sal jy as ek", uhm, "nou-nou by die huis is", uhm, "op die bed lê, reg vir my en jouself vasgemaak het" en sulke goeters. En dan kom dit daarop neer, van as jy dit nie doen nie dan's jy nie lief vir my nie. Uhm, so in daai opsig was dit vir my baie moeilik, want wat doen jy? Want, op die ou einde van die dag is ek lief vir Corne, so jy wil doen wat hom gelukkig en "happy" maak.

From the above it is evident that these messages placed Liesel in an impossible situation. On the one hand, if she engaged in these sexual activities she was doomed due to the fact that she experienced these activities as re-traumatisation and as, in her own words, killing her. On the other hand, if she did not engage in these sexual activities, she was also doomed because according to these messages Corne would interpret her refusal as signifying that she did not love him, which, for her, carried the implication that their relationship would eventually not survive. In addition, there is the third element of the double bind, namely that she cannot leave the field (or in this case, the relationship), or really comment on the impact of the message on her. From a systemic perspective, in systems and contexts where messages are contradicted or nullified on various levels, symptoms and pathology often become a logical way to respond to, or comment on the confounding messages sent by other system members (Haley, 1963). Thus, symptoms are not understood only as internal individual pathologies, but also as metaphors for ecologies of relationships or communications about relationships. In their couple system where the solution is to "not talk", looking at symptoms metaphorically or in terms of their communicative value may be especially helpful.

How one sees, understands or hypothesises about these symptoms is really in the eye of the beholder. In this regard, Liesel's symptoms of depression and suicide could possibly be interpreted as metaphoric for and communication about the relational vacuum their marriage has become. One can also hypothesise that the dysfunctionality of their sexual pattern may be metaphoric of their larger struggle for control of the relationship definition. On other levels, it may also be reflective of their ambivalence about being close, as these sexual activities seem to contain an inherent paradox. In this regard, they are physically close; however, with Liesel dissociating there cannot be any other real intimacy. Thus, closeness is achieved on a superficial level, while the nature of that closeness simultaneously disconnects them, thereby preventing real intimacy and togetherness.

The impact of the couple's rigid and ineffective communication pattern, rules and communication traps is confounded by the fact that they do not have a meta-communication rule which would allow them to

comment on the impact of their communication on one another, and which might serve to clarify much of the misunderstandings, incorrect assumptions and tension between them.

6.4.5 A dance for two becomes a dance of threes

From the discussions of the above themes, it became clear that this couple's system is vulnerable to breaking down or disintegrating, given their undefined relationship, struggle for control, ambivalence about closeness and togetherness, dysfunctional intimacy patterns and ineffective communication pattern and rules. As mentioned in chapters two and three, trauma processes can in themselves be characterised by patterns of instability, tension and anxiety. Systemically speaking, one may view the instability of trauma patterns as being superimposed on the pre-existing vulnerability as regards disintegration in Liesel and Corne's system. Furthermore, trauma not only conveys information about itself to the system, but also creates awareness about the system's way of functioning. This information has a destabilising impact, or triggers or exacerbates the pre-existing vulnerabilities, instabilities, anxiety and tension within a system. As should be clear from the discussion thus far, the couple has been exposed to severe once-off stressful events, as well as chronic and persistent stress and anxiety. It seems that their system has been consistently threatened and destabilised to such an extent that the triangulation of third parties has become another rigid pattern in their relationship. In this regard, triangulation appears to be a way of refocusing attention away from their dysfunctional relationship and also a method of defusing relational tension and anxiety, thereby restabilising their system or maintaining homeostasis in a chronically stressful and changing context.

In this regard it seems that, within their nuclear family, all three of the children are at times triangulated into the couple's relationship. This was especially evident from the fact that the children were sleeping in the couple's bedroom at the time of the joint interviews, despite the fact that they own a three bedroomed house. Allowing the children to sleep in their bedroom may be a way for the couple to avoid and also focus attention away from the anxiety and discomfort regarding sexual intimacy in their relationship. Furthermore, it also seems the children as well as Liesel and Corne's parental responsibilities are triangulated into their marital subsystem in a manner which helps to maintain their pattern of avoiding one another. In this regard, the children and the couple's parental responsibilities are used as parts of manoeuvres for distance, justification for not dealing with or supporting one another through traumas or stressful events and also for failing to address relationship problems and difficulties.

> Corne: ...Maar, weet, om te gaan sit en gesels moet jy: een, weg wees van jou kinders af, want
> dit moenie...ag vergeet om te probeer, ek meen, jy sien self ek meen ons probeer hierso 'n

gesprek hê, maar ek meen hulle is heeltyd hier in en uit. Uhm, dit is nie maklik om te gesels nie. Dis goeters wat jy nie noodwendig wil hê jou kinders, wat, moet hoor en heeltyd betrokke wees. En as mens gesels, dan wil mens gesels. Mens wil nie nou nog heeltyd onderbrekings hê nie. Jy weet, so, dis, dit, ek, ek probeer nie eers om oor, uhm, ek wil amper sê "serious issues" te gesels nie.

The triangulation of the children in order to relieve tension in the couple system was also evident during the interviews and especially during the second interview, which was intended to focus more closely on discussion of the rape. In this regard it seemed that they often avoided discussion of the research topic by focusing on discussions about the children and their difficulties as parents. Furthermore, the children, and especially Hein, often came into the room at critical moments in the conversation, which provided a reason for either Corne or Liesel to temporarily leave the conversation.

In addition to the children, it also seems that Liesel's sexual abuse and the rape were triangulated into the couple's relationship, not necessarily to alleviate tension, but to diffuse some of the tension and anxiety regarding the dysfunctionality of their sexual pattern. This was evident from the couple blaming these traumas in a linear fashion for their problems regarding sexual and non-sexual intimacy and closeness. By doing so, they could distance themselves from taking responsibility and avoid addressing the interpersonal impact and dysfunctionality of their sexual pattern with one another. Thus, paradoxically these traumas contributed to the anxiety and focused attention on how the couple related sexually, but at the same time diverted some anxiety, ambivalence and attention away from the couple's intimacy problems and dysfunctionality by providing justification for not addressing these issues with one another. However, from the couple's account it is clear that, although triangulation of these traumas temporarily or occasionally diverted attention away from the issues of intimacy, in the long term this triangulation actually illuminated the dysfunctionality of their sexual pattern. In this regard it seems to be especially significant that one would expect the presence of such traumas in a relationship to create more sensitivity and attention to how a couple relates sexually, whereas with Liesel and Corne this did not happen.

Another aspect that often seems to be triangulated into their relationship to relieve the tension and anxiety regarding the way in which traumas, stressors and relational problems are dealt with, is that of religion. Triangulating and making God an ally as part of a manoeuvre or countermanoeuvre seems to be especially effective in quelling conversations about traumatic or stressful events and relationship issues.

Corne: Ag ek meen, natuurlik het al hierdie goed 'n impak op 'n mens se huwelikslewe. Ek meen, ek, uhm, mens se behoeftes wat mens, of verwagtinge verskil partykeer. Uhm, ek weet nie, dis, dis moeilik om te sê. Ons sal, ons sal seker die punt moet bereik wat ons gaan sit en op 'n stadium gesels daaroor en goeters. Ek glo net dat 'n mens nie, uh, God wil nie hê 'n mens moet in die verlede leef nie. Hoe sleg of hoe goed dinge ook al is, uhm, die verlede is nie wat saak maak nie.

Corne: …Maar ag, ons…ek weet nie…dis, jy weet, uhm, daar is een ding in die Bybel wat sê "Maak jou los van wat agter uit is, en strek jou uit na wat voor is". EK leef nie in die verlede nie, want nommer een, die verlede kan nie die toekoms verander nie. En hoe langer jy in die verlede leef, hoe meer mis jy die huidige oomblikke.

Furthermore, the triangulation of religion was not only limited to dealing with traumas and relationship problems, but seems to be ultimately employed as part of the struggle for control of their relationship definition:

Liesel: …En mens moet bes, verstaan dat God aan die hoof staan en dat hy dan die man tweede geplaas het, en dan die vrou. En maak nie saak wat nie, jy moet aan jou man onderdanig wees. Uhm, Gretha (spreker by huwelikseminaar) *het ook daar gesê, selfs al glo jou man nie aan die Here nie, moet jy nog steeds aan jou man onderdanig wees. En dis 'n opdrag van die Here af. …Uhm, maar ek glo en vertrou dat, dat ek hard daaraan gaan werk om vir Corne daai spasie te gee, om die koning van ons huisgesin te word. En om wel onderdanig aan hom te wees. Nie dat ek sê jy moet nooit iets sê en sulke goed nie. Maar 'n mens moet terugstaan en vir hom ook spasie in die gesin gee. Om die gesin te kan "run".*

Corne: …o, uhm, jy weet, dis waar wat Liesel sê. As, as ons enige iets wil bereik, en ek wil amper sê, as Liesel wil bo uitkom met haar "struggles", dan MOET ons die orde herstel wat God wil hê. God eerste, man en vrou gelyk, maar die man…is die hoof van die huis. En dan die kinders. Voor dit nie gaan herstel nie, kan jy maak wat jy wil, jy kan praat soveel as wat jy wil, jy kan praat met wie jy wil, jy kan praat met 5 miljoen mense, as daai orde nie herstel word nie, gaan dit nie help nie.

However, looking at the above systemically, her standing back and letting Corne be the head of the house means that Liesel is actually in control from a meta-position, as she now controls what happens in their relationship by choosing to let Corne be in control. Although one can only speculate about the impact of a meta-control position in their relationship in the absence of meta-communication rules which would allow the couple to comment on such manoeuvres, this does seem to be a more

appropriate and functional way of gaining control when compared to their usual pattern of denying controlling manoeuvres.

Another means by which the couple refocuses anxiety and tension away from their system, especially regarding their increasing distance and avoidance of serious discussions and dealing with the various stressful events, is by triangulating the future into their relationship. By doing so and defining the present situation, the present difficulties, struggles and avoidance as in service of this bright harmonious future, tension and anxiety around current relational issues are temporarily relieved, and system stability is maintained.

> Liesel: Ek meen, tyd is 'n groot faktor. Soos jy sê, jy werk na 'n punt toe. Jy glo en vertrou dat sou ons op die ou einde van die dag 'n ander huis kan kry en goeters, sal dinge baie verander. Maar ja, net om tot by daardie punt te kom, nê, vat baie van 'n mens.
>
> Corne: ... En dis hoekom, jy weet, om nou myself te stres omdat mens nie by alles uitkom wat mens wil, of moet by uitkom nie. Jy weet, ek het nie tyd om te stres oor sulke goeters nie. Eerlikwaar, ek hoop en bid die goeters kom deur en dan gaan, GAAN ons lewe verander. Ek weet dit. Ek meen, en as ons die tyd het, en ons het die geld, dan gaan ons die probleme oplos.

The triangulation of the future also seems to relieve the tension and conflict around the increasing amount of time that Corne spends at work and his increased withdrawal from the family. In turn, Corne's work responsibilities and his responsibility as the sole financial provider also seem to be triangulated into their relationship in order to diffuse attention away from the conflict and tension around his lack of support following the rape:

> Corne: Ja, maar jy weet, weereens, as ek haar moes ondersteun in die mate wat ek seker behoort te gedoen het, sou ek moes afvat by die werk...Jy weet, so, uhm, as ek dit nou weer moes doen, dan moet ek afvat by die werk om haar te gaan ondersteun en goed. Ek het nie daai tyd nie. Ek het nie daai "luxury" van, van vryheid om te sê, jy weet: los jou werk, vir die volgende twee weke is ek nie daar nie. Ek, ek, ek het dit nie, weet, so, uhm, ek weet nie wat anderster om daaroor te sê nie. Dis net 'n geval van, ja, ek, ek kon meer ondersteunend gewees het wat dit betref. Dis nie dat ek...uhm, nie heeltemaal dalk, nie sou verstaan hoe Liesel voel of iets nie. Dis net, ek het nie die tyd om daaraan aandag te gee nie.

Some of the above triangulations appear to be more functional than others. In this regard, the triangulation of religion and God into their relationship may prove to be functional in that it provides a sense of meaningfulness and purpose to many of the traumas and extreme stressors the couple has endured over the years and may serve to counter a sense of hopelessness and futility. Also, placing the

non-discussion rule in a different context, namely that of religion, may prove to be the change the system needs in order to escape or relieve its stuckness and ongoing struggles in terms of this rule. However, this reframing also contains the potential to perpetuate an already untenable situation, as it may allow some of their dysfunctional patterns to continue and may also prevent the emergence of new and more appropriate patterns and skills, especially in terms of communication. In a similar way, placing the struggle for control of the relationship definition and various areas of their relationship in the context of a religion-based hierarchy may relieve the system's stuckness in this regard, but might also perpetuate its stuckness if Liesel's victim role and position are further entrenched. How the system will respond to these reframes will ultimately be determined by the system itself. What does not appear to be functional at this stage, however, is the triangulation of the future, as this may prevent the above reframes from taking effect now. The triangulation of the children into the couple's dyad also does not appear to be functional, given the level of the symptoms with which the children present.

Despite the above functionality or dysfunctionality of the various triangles formed between the couple and other persons and events, it became apparent during the individual interview with Liesel that the couple's pattern of triangulation had eventually failed to keep their system stable and that their system is now escalating towards disintegration. At this point it seems that although these triangulations may have stabilised the system on some levels, on other levels and over time they have served to increase the distance and disconnectedness in the couple system. Thus, consistently turning a dance for two into a dance for three seems to have escalated the individual autonomy in their dance to such an extent that the couple has completely lost their rhythm, music and also one another in the process.

6.4.6 Secrecy and lying in the context of rape

According to Fainzang (2002) lying and secrecy have to do with power and position in relationships and both also have to do with how privileged information is handled. In cases where such information is merely withheld or not shared, it is difficult to distinguish between secrecy and lying as it will most likely be a matter of perception. However, lying distinguishes itself clearly from secrecy the moment information is not merely withheld, but false information is shared in place of the information that is withheld. From the interviews it became apparent that, in this couple, the rape is surrounded by both lies and secrecy. In this regard, during the individual interview Liesel indicated she withheld information about the perpetrator's race and provided Corne with false information, namely that the perpetrator was a white man.

> Liesel: ...Ek, hy, hy't, die, die eerste ding wat hy...vir my gevra het van na die verkragting, het
> hy vir my gevra: "Was dit 'n swart man of 'n wit man?" Toe sê ek: "Dit was 'n blanke ou". En

dit was nie, dit was 'n swart man. Maar my probleem op daai stadium was van, as Corne hoor dit was 'n swart man, gaan hy nie meer intiem met my wil verkeer nie. Uhm, so my eerste reaksie op daai stadium was, was om vir hom te sê, nee, dit was 'n blanke ou. Uhm, so ja, ek…

In terms of the above quotation this lie appears to perform a dual function. On the one hand, by lying Liesel appears to protect herself against likely rejection by Corne, should he know the real race of the perpetrator. Furthermore, by lying she also endeavoured to ensure the maintenance of intimacy in their relationship and ultimately the maintenance of their relationship, as it appears that, had Corne known the truth, intimacy between them would have become non-existent and his rejection of her in all probability would have eventually ended their relationship. Her lying about the perpetrator's race confirms the dysfunctionality of their system in various ways. It clearly reflects the lack of open communication between them. Perhaps most disconcerting, it also indicates a lack of mutual trust at a time when Liesel was in dire need of support and care. Furthermore, her explanation also conveys a longstanding and profound uncertainty about Corne's commitment to her, the value he attaches to her and their relationship, and also indicates an acute awareness of the fragility of their relationship.

In addition to the above, the couple is keeping the rape secret from the rest of their nuclear family as well as from the extended family. In Karpel's (1980) terms this can be classified as an internal family secret. Some contradictory information was provided in terms of whether or not this was an explicit mutual decision made by the couple. This secrecy seems to be functional on some levels, but less functional on others. In this regard, keeping the rape secret from their young children who, at the time of the rape would not have been able to form a clear understanding of what had happened and would very likely have been traumatised by the information, seems to have been functional. However, not disclosing the rape to the extended family, or at least to certain members of the extended family, had the impact of significantly reducing the support and resources available to the couple in the immediate aftermath of the rape, as well as in the long term. Furthermore, given their disconnectedness from one another and the lack of support and care that were available in their relationship in the aftermath of the rape, disclosure to the extended family may have provided much needed consolation and support for them as individuals.

6.5 CONCLUSION

On the surface Liesel and Corne's system and relationship appeared to be remarkably unaffected by the rape, with the couple reporting very little expression of individual distress, post-rape system instability or disorganisation. In fact, it seemed that after the rape they merely continued with everyday life as if nothing had happened. In addition, with the exception of Liesel informing Corne of the rape and a

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subsequent conversation about the superficial details of the event, they actively avoided all rape-related discussions and also colluded in minimising the significance and extent of the rape's impact on them individually and on their relationship. Their collusion, patterns of avoidance and minimisation were also maintained during the joint interviews.

It was evident from the thematic discussion that in order to gain a deeper understanding of the couple's experiences of and their abovementioned responses to the rape, as well as of the complex interplay between the rape and their relationship and system, one must consider their functioning as a couple before the rape. From their story it was apparent that their history is characterised by the prominence of traumatic events and extreme stressors, both external and internal to their system. In terms of external traumas, Liesel has endured childhood sexual abuse and more recently stranger rape, whereas Corne reportedly was the victim of an acquaintance rape years ago. Extreme stressors occurring within their system include the couple's dysfunctional sexual and intimacy patterns, two miscarriages, Hein's post-birth heart complications and Liesel's suicide attempts. With trauma and extreme stressors such a constant feature of their world and reality, the couple has probably come to perceive, experience and understand their contexts of living as unpredictable, ever-changing, uncontrollable and at times even threatening.

Given these contexts of living, and with multiple trauma processes being superimposed on and complicating the ways they could potentially interact with one another, the couple began to over-emphasise morphostasis very early on. In other words, amidst this complexity, limitations and unpredictability, the couple co-evolved certain interactional rules, patterns and processes which were maintained regardless of contextual requirements, not taking into account whether they were dealing with an everyday event, relationship problem or a trauma, regardless of the degree of threat an event or problem posed to their system and even regardless of altering individual and system needs. These particularly include a pattern of avoidance and minimisation of painful emotions, relational problems and trauma; an unbalanced focus on and preference for system tasks and pragmatics in crisis situations, at the expense of allocating energy and resources to the couple system; promoting separateness and individual autonomy at the expense of togetherness, manifesting in rigid individual boundaries and patterns of relational disconnectedness and distance; severe and persistent lack of mutual support, care and nurturance; dysfunctional sexual and intimacy patterns; and a dysfunctional communication pattern and rules, including an all pervasive "not talking"-rule and the rationalisations holding it in place, which in turn feed into and maintain their patterns of disconnectedness, sexual and intimacy patterns, avoidance and lack of mutual support and care.

Although initially a solution in order to maintain stability amidst ever-changing contexts and confusing trauma processes, it became evident from the thematic discussion that the over-emphasis on morphostasis in the long term fed back into their system and relational dynamics, creating extreme rigidity. In this regard, their system became unable to modify ineffective patterns, processes, rules, coping and problem solving strategies, or to integrate new information and co-evolve new, more appropriate or more functional ones. As a result their system could not meet the demands posed by normative developmental challenges, such as having children, and any maturing of their relationship, or meet the demands posed by non-normative, stressful or traumatic events. This culminated in their system becoming stuck in outmoded ways of functioning, which in the long term created and amplified tension, dissatisfaction and conflict. In other words, their system's over-emphasis on morphostasis became fundamentally destabilising and threatening to their system and its survival.

If one places the couple's experiences of and response to the rape in the larger context of their relationship and system together with the abovementioned history, relational dynamics and rigid way of functioning, it becomes possible to move beyond the mask donned by the couple in the interviews. From this perspective it is clear that their relationship and system were not unaffected by the rape. As was demonstrated the couple dealt with, and still deals with, the rape in accordance with their abovementioned patterns, processes and rules. In this regard, it was shown that the abovementioned minimisation, avoidance and collusion surrounding the rape comprise part of their longstanding approach and outdated coping strategy for dealing with painful events, emotions and relational problems. Similarly, in the immediate aftermath of the rape, they dealt with the rape in accordance with their pattern of an unbalanced focus on and preference for system tasks and pragmatics in crisis situations, at the expense of allocating energy and resources to the couple system. Although clearly ineffective for dealing with and integrating the rape in the long term, in the immediate aftermath of the rape these dynamics did appear to be effective in some respects. In this regard they seemingly enabled the couple to maintain the stability of their executive system, thereby ensuring the uninterrupted functioning of the family system as a whole and safeguarding their children from the ordeal.

However, it was evident that, despite avoiding and minimising the trauma surrounding the rape, they could not, and still cannot, contain the recursive, insidious and destabilising impact of the rape on their system and relationship in the long term. In this regard, the fact that the rape strongly resonates with their dysfunctional intimacy and sexual patterns and also, to some extent, with their redundant, limited role patterns as victim, victimiser and rescuer, appears to be especially pivotal and destabilising. By resonating with these patterns, the rape not only illuminates, but also constantly brings to the couple's awareness the dysfunctionality of and their tension and discomfort with these patterns. Liesel and

Corne's acute awareness of common elements between the rape, their sexual and intimacy patterns, and their victim and victimiser roles, makes it increasingly impossible for the couple to engage with one another, and to have their needs met in accordance with these dysfunctional patterns. Since these patterns have, over time, become part of their system's homeostatic mechanisms, and in the absence of other more appropriate patterns or sufficient adaptability and flexibility to co-evolve different patterns, this awareness continues to destabilise and threaten the survival of their system. Yet, in keeping with the rigidity of their system dynamics, the couple continues to avoid discussion of the rape and of the abovementioned relational problems, which in turn merely amplifies the system's instability.

At the time of the individual interview with Liesel, this instability appeared to be furthermore amplified by as well as feeding into the couple's longstanding dissatisfaction, tension, disagreement, conflict and discomfort with how they interact with one another in other relational domains. This especially relates to their respective behaviours as parents and to how privacy between them is maintained, in other words, negotiation regarding their system's boundary processes. At the time of this interview with Liesel, it seemed that all their system's homeostatic mechanisms have been eroded or destabilised to such an extent that their system was escalating towards disintegration.

Simultaneously grounding their relational dynamics and being shaped by these is the couple's sense of themselves as a unit, or to use Fergus and Reid's (2001) description, a couple's sense of their "we-ness". As such, Liesel and Corne's sense of themselves also informed and guided their responses, as a couple, to the rape. In this regard, they came across as having a very clear sense of their unit as a non-"we-ness" which is profoundly unsafe, ineffective and characterised by ambivalent commitment or a lack of it. Their sense of their unit as unsafe seems to have evolved out of how they, as a couple, had handled sexual traumas in the past and out of the ongoing distressing experiences and interactions taking place between them, such as their dysfunctional sexual and intimacy patterns and Liesel's frequent suicide attempts and self-harming behaviour.

Various researchers have found both the rape victim and her partner experience major concerns about safety and protection in the post-rape context and both often attempt to ensure and restore safety on the individual and interpersonal levels and in their physical environment (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1985; Herman, 1992; Remer & Ferguson, 1995). However, given their unsafe non-"we-ness", Liesel and Corne could not turn to one another for confirmation and restoration of safety and protection in the post-rape context. Rather, in their threatening relational reality, avoiding and minimising the rape and denying and minimising their individual distress are logical responses, as these simultaneously limit involvement by the other and serve as self-protection.

Furthermore, their experience of their unit as unsafe would have fed back into and maintained their communication rule of "not talking" in the post-rape context, because mutual trust, safety and respect are prerequisites for open communication and sharing. Also, focusing attention away from the couple system and onto maintenance tasks in terms of the larger family system, such as taking care of the children and going to work, may have been the only levels of involvement and action that could have been tolerated by the couple in the immediate post-rape context, without unduly amplifying individual distress and the instability of the entire family system, thereby threatening its survival.

In addition to the above, Liesel and Corne are acutely aware of their ineffectiveness as a couple and frequently reiterated throughout the interviews that past attempts at dealing with traumas, extreme stressors and relational problems have been frustrating, painful, distressing and ultimately unsatisfying because very little, if anything, was resolved. Furthermore, Liesel indicated that despite their frequent attendance of church based marital camps, marital seminars, and on occasion therapy, seemingly as part of attempts to alleviate relational tension, distress and dissatisfaction and to improve their functioning as a couple, these efforts have not wrought any lasting changes as they quickly revert back to their usual ineffective way of being as a couple. Paradoxically, not integrating the information gained from, or sustaining the alternative interactional patterns exposed to during these events, most likely further illuminated and confirmed their ineffectiveness and dysfunctionality as a couple. Their sense of their unit as ineffective seems to have set the stage for certain assumptions about, expectations and perceptions of one another in the post-rape context, which in turn fed into their individual responses to the rape, eventually culminating in the couple not even attempting to approach or deal with the rape as a team.

In addition to the above, Liesel and Corne both indicated they have, in the past, thought about leaving their marriage. Furthermore, Corne's disinterest in and lack of commitment to their relationship was evident in his written reflections. Liesel, on the other hand, came across as ambivalent about her commitment in this respect. However, she is, and has been, very aware of Corne's lack of commitment to their relationship, and specifically his lack of commitment to her. They also appear to, over the years, have increasingly come to experience what they are sacrificing as individuals, in order to belong to the relationship, as outweighing the benefits and value of being together. Thus, they perceive and experience their relationship as a burden. Long before the rape, this perception of, their ambivalence about being in and questionable commitment to their relationship had culminated in the couple channelling the majority of their system's resources into the sibling subsystem, or systems outside of their nuclear family.

In the post-rape context their system and relationship, already extremely vulnerable due to unresolved previous traumas, ongoing stressors, rigidity, ineffective and dysfunctional dynamics, and the effort and energy required to keep this vulnerable and tension-ridden system stable and functioning, were required to face the challenge of yet another trauma. Experiencing their unit as uncommitted and as a burden fed into the post-rape context, significantly restricting the level of resources and effort the couple expended towards one another in terms of support, care and nurturance and the amount of resources and effort invested to protect their relationship. Given their sense of their unit as unsafe and ineffective, not allocating valuable and limited resources and efforts to their unit in all likelihood also constituted part of their self-preservation strategies, as well as preservation strategies in terms of their larger family system.

From the above discussion it is clear that the couple's history of prominent trauma, frequent stressful experiences and relational problems, their system and relationship's extreme rigidity and dysfunctional dynamics, as well as their sense of their unit as unsafe, ineffective and lacking in commitment and value, made for a system and relationship that was struggling to remain stable, functioning and to survive, well before the rape occurred. In this relational context, the rape initially became just another trauma and problem that needed to be contained and managed through avoidance and minimisation. However, in retrospect it is possible to perceive how the rape's resonance with and illumination of their system's dysfunctional dynamics and meanings, and the fact that even an extreme trauma, such as stranger rape, could not mobilise their system and relationship out of its rigid dysfunctionality, insidiously played into and amplified pre-existing tension and dissatisfaction. This in turn, began to interfere with and, over time, eventually eroded their system's powerful negative feedback cycles which had been maintaining system stability, finally pushing it into chaos. Given the fact that their system clearly lacks the potential and creativity to evolve new patterns, processes and rules, which could ensure its survival, and in the absence of commitment to their relationship, it seems unlikely that their system will survive for much longer.

CHAPTER 7

CHRISTELLE AND BRIAN: FROM DANCING THEIR DANCE THE SUN EMERGES

7.1 THE CONTEXT

The couple stays in a three bedroom house in one of the smaller suburbs of North West Province (referred to as HB in the transcriptions and quotations). On her arrival on both occasions the researcher was greeted by the family at their property's gate. The house is being renovated, so the interior of the house is in some disarray. The house also reflected the fact that there are two young children living there and had a warm and lived-in feel to it. The interviews were conducted in the living room, which is open plan to both the dining area and the kitchen.

7.2 INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

7.2.1 Telephonic contact

The researcher was put into contact with the couple by a psychologist working at the rape crisis centre of a provincial hospital. The first telephonic contact was made possible through the above psychologist. She discussed the research and possible participation with Christelle during a follow-up counseling session and then called the researcher to speak to Christelle directly. Christelle indicated that the couple would possibly participate in the research. The researcher then arranged to call her later the same day to discuss the research and participation in more detail. The researcher telephoned Christelle at the arranged time, and during the conversation she indicated that she needed to confirm with her husband first, but that they would possibly participate. It was arranged that the researcher would call her in two day's time to confirm. When the researcher telephoned Christelle on the arranged day, their participation and an appointment for the first interview were confirmed.

7.2.2 Interviews

During the interviews the couple initially came across as somewhat reserved, but as the interviews unfolded and rapport was established, they appeared to relax and spoke freely. They often made eye contact with each other throughout both interviews, and checked the accuracy of the information they provided with one another. They often waited for the other to finish speaking and when they interrupted one another it was to add to, confirm or elaborate on what was being said. Brian often brought humour into the conversation, and joked with both Christelle and the researcher. The humour was appropriate to the context and appeared to be a way of connecting with other people, as his interactional style seems to be more reserved. Brian was quite open and engaged in conversations about

the rape and shared his feelings, experiences and views quite easily. Christelle came across as more serious; however, this should be seen in the context of the research and may not be reflective of her usual interactional style. She was also quite open, engaged in conversations about the rape and easily shared her feelings, experiences and views. She sometimes laughed almost wearily, when discussing painful events or experiences or when she was uncomfortable. This, together with rationalisation, seemed to be in keeping with her wanting to put distance between herself and the rape ordeal and move on. Finally, she presented as older and more mature than her chronological age and the researcher was quite surprised to learn that she was only 21 years old.

7.3 BACKGROUND

7.3.1 Personal

Christelle is the oldest child in a family of six children. She has four sisters and a brother. Her brother is intellectually handicapped and is in a special school. Her highest qualification is Grade 10, or Standard 8. She fell pregnant with the couple's first child during her Grade 10 year and did not complete her schooling. She was intermittently employed in various positions during the course of their relationship. While she was expecting their first child, Tessa, she worked as a shop assistant, but resigned when the company relocated to Johannesburg. When Tessa was born she was a stay-at-home mother for approximately two years. Then she obtained a position as a teacher's assistant at a nursery school. She enrolled Tessa in the same school, and worked in this position for approximately two years. She resigned shortly before their second child, Thomas, was born and at the time the interviews were conducted, she was again a stay-at-home mother. She generally described her family relationships as strong and shares a particularly close bond with her father and brother. Christelle described herself as occupying the role of a typical older sister, often babysitting her siblings and being like a second mother to them.

Brian is 26 years old and is the oldest in a family of three children, all boys. He obtained Grade 12, or matric, and started working immediately after completing his schooling. He is currently employed by a private company which is in the electricity and energy management field. Brian also described his relationships with his family as generally close and shares a particularly close bond with his youngest brother. He and his second brother work for the same company. He described his role in the family as that of the joker.

7.3.2 Their relationship

They met one another when Christelle was 16 years old and Brian was 21. Christelle saw a photo of Brian, shown to her by her cousin. Later she found out that Brian had also been shown a photo of her by a mutual friend. Christelle's cousin gave Brian a cell phone number where he could contact her. After some hesitation and urging by his youngest brother, Brian called the number. It turned out that this number was her father's cell phone number and Brian was quite unnerved by the fact that he had to then ask to speak to Christelle. Following the first telephone call, they maintained telephonic contact for about two weeks, after which Brian invited Christelle to a barbeque. According to Christelle, they have been together ever since.

During the first year of their relationship, Christelle fell pregnant. Her mother was extremely upset by the pregnancy and informed the couple that they would live at Christelle's parents' house. According to them her mother did not speak to either of them for approximately six months. After a while they decided to move out of her parents' house and stay on their own. They moved to the same suburb they are living in now. Since then they have mended the relationship with Christelle's mother and it seems that the couple is close to both Christelle's and Brian's family.

The couple married shortly after their daughter was born. At the time of the interviews Tessa was four years old and they had also been married for four years. They decided to have a second child when Tessa was approximately two years old. The couple had some difficulty conceiving, but eventually Christelle fell pregnant and their son was born in 2007. At the time of the interviews he was approximately ten months old.

7.3.3 Rape-trauma

The couple lived in the above suburb for three years, before deciding to move closer to Christelle's parents towards the end of 2007. Her parents reside on a smallholding in Gauteng and the couple's new house was approximately one kilometer from their house. According to the couple, they decided to move there for various reasons, which included difficulties with the water supply at their previous place of residence, as well as more affordable rental property. In addition, Brian's parents had also relocated from the area where the couple used to stay, and the couple decided to move closer to Christelle's parents in order to re-establish a support network.

They lived in the new suburb for approximately eight months. During this time, their house was burgled six times. The rape occurred on a Friday morning in March 2008. Brian had just left for work,

when the perpetrators gained access to the couple's house through Tessa's bedroom window. Both children and Christelle were asleep in the master bedroom. Christelle woke up when the perpetrators were standing in the room. One of the assailants had a knife with him, which he pressed against Tessa's stomach; she started crying. Christelle put Tessa's head under her arm to protect her, calm her down and also so that she could not see what was happening. One of the assailants proceeded to rape Christelle at knife point. According to Christelle he was wearing her husband's clothes, which he had apparently stolen during one of the burglaries.

When the assailants left, Christelle phoned her sister and father for assistance. The police were also contacted. Christelle did not want to phone Brian herself, as she was concerned that her distress might upset him and impair his ability to drive home safely. Her father eventually informed Brian telephonically about the rape and he rushed home immediately. The couple moved out of the house the same weekend, and moved in with Christelle's parents. They stayed there for approximately a month, after which they returned to their old suburb. This was approximately one and a half months before the second interview.

7.4 THEMES

7.4.1 The strength within and the strength between

During the interviews it became apparent that strength is an important value in the couple system, as well as in their larger families of origin. In this regard it seems that individuals and relationships within the couple's families are generally constructed as strong and capable of dealing with life as it comes their way. Thus, although strength was often described as a personal character trait throughout the interviews, this seems to be an individual way of being and acting that was co-created within their systems and between system members over time.

> *Christelle: Ja, nee dis een ding. My, ek en my ma-hulle en my skoonma-hulle en hy en sy ma-hulle en my ma-hulle, ons is, ons is baie…uhm, sterk familie, weet ons vat die dag soos hy kom en as die dag kakkerig is, dan is hy maar so. As dit 'n goeie dag is, is dit 'n goeie dag. Weet, dis, dis maar die mense wat ons is.*

Congruent with this construction, the couple also defined their relationship, even before having gone through the ordeal of the rape, as strong. It furthermore became apparent that their families also view the couple as a strong unit. The couple's strength, and perceptions of them as strong, seems to have partly evolved out of the abovementioned family reality, but also out of trying circumstances very early on in their relationship. As mentioned earlier, the couple fell pregnant in the first year of their relationship, when Christelle was 16 years old and Brian was 21. The pregnancy came as a shock to the

couple and evoked mixed reactions from their parents. Brian's parents are reported to have been delighted about the pregnancy, whereas Christelle's parents, and especially her mother, are reported to have been extremely angry, as described above.

The pregnancy and impending birth of their first child signalled a critical time in the couple's relationship, as it meant that their system was changing and extending to include a parental and sibling subsystem, while Christelle was at the same time still considered a child in her family of origin. In other words, they had to deal with the crisis of the pregnancy as well as various other factors which amplified the pressure and instability inherent in structural system changes, such as social perceptions regarding teenage pregnancy, related pressure especially from Christelle's family towards over-involvement, and also the fact that they were still in the early phases of establishing and negotiating the rules and patterns for their relationship. Despite being very young it seems that they were quite capable of dealing with the pressure and meeting the demands of this stressful situation, while simultaneously continuing to establish a strong foundation for their relationship.

In this regard, the couple dealt with the situation in a manner that seemed to balance the demands set by the larger family system with the needs and protection of their own system. They initially moved in with her parents, but after six months, when it became clear that this arrangement was not working, they decided to move out and live on their own. Systemically speaking, the couple moving out of the parents' home can be seen as a counter-manoeuvre which affirmatively communicated their togetherness as a unit to the larger family of origin, thereby beginning to clearly demarcate the boundaries of their system and protecting their extending nuclear family from intrusive or overbearing opinions and involvement.

> *Navorser: So, dit klink vir my in die begin was die probleme…oor dat jy swanger geraak het?*
> *Christelle: Ja.*
> *Navorser: Hoe het julle dit hanteer as 'n paartjie?*
> *Christelle: Ag, ek dink…* (Brian begin praat)
> *Brian: Ek dink baie goed* (Christelle begin praat)
> *Christelle: Ons het, baie goed. Ek het uitgevind ek is swanger, ek het my doodgestres en toe besluit ek net: dis, dit is my lewe en die res van die mense wat dit nie wil aanvaar nie moet, jy weet, hulle moet maar gaan. Dit is, dit was ons…jy weet, dit was nie 'n keuse nie, maar ons het dit gekry en ons het dit gevat en ons het haar, ons maak haar self groot…*

Similarly, after their daughter's birth, the couple needed to redefine their boundaries with the larger system following renewed pressure as regards over-involvement, from especially Brian's family. This

seemed to involve conflicts and differences of opinion between the couple and the family regarding how the couple should care for and raise their child. It seems that the couple was able to maintain clear boundaries by opening their nuclear family system to helpful interactions such as making use of the support network available in the larger system in terms of baby sitting and advice, but also by closing their system boundaries to information or opinions they considered intrusive or that did not fit with how they viewed their family and how they wanted to raise their child.

From the above it is clear that the couple becoming parents at such a young age and their subsequent attempts at differentiation initially hugely upset the stability in both the larger family systems. This triggered various negative feedback loops to maintain Christelle and Brain's positions as children in the larger units, while also dealing with the changes inherent in the emergence of a new generation. One gains the sense that at this stage, the couple system and their newly formed family system were at risk of being subsumed by their families of origin. However, the couple continuously manoeuvred to differentiate and position their relationship, and themselves, as separate from but connected to the larger family systems. Part of these manoeuvres entailed positioning themselves as parents who, although still young, are the primary caregivers of their child and therefore the ones who decide on and determine their child's upbringing. These changes and persistent messages by the couple produced powerful positive feedback cycles and the larger family systems were eventually transformed. Christelle and Brian's families made the necessary changes and accepted the couple's new positions as a young married couple, and as young parents. Following these transformations, relationships between the couple and their families remain characterised by appropriate levels of involvement, connectedness, support and independence.

Thus, during a time of crisis the couple was able to establish and maintain clear, appropriate couple system and nuclear family system boundaries that were permeable enough to allow the crossing of boundaries when necessary and required to provide or receive support, nurturance and guidance. Furthermore, these boundaries were also flexible enough to become temporarily rigid and impermeable, thereby excluding information and interference from any source, including their own family systems, if this information was deemed too different, intrusive or threatening to their system.

In addition to establishing and maintaining appropriate and clear boundaries, the couple's emergent strength was furthermore apparent in their being able to not only juggle the above pressures of positioning themselves within the larger family unit with the additional pressures of parenthood, but also to simultaneously balance these aspects with negotiating, settling and establishing their relationship. It seems that within their system they were able to negotiate and settle their new roles as

mother, father, husband and wife and also made the necessary adjustments in accordance with their respective role responsibilities. In this regard, they began to modify their socialisation patterns and how they spent their time together as a couple. Furthermore, through the process of dealing with the pregnancy crisis, they established mutual trust and effective patterns and skills for problem solving, cooperation and dealing with crises. During the interviews, it became apparent that their relationship was characterised by mutual acknowledgement, respect and support and also that they complement and appreciate one another's roles, responsibilities and investment in their relationship. Thereby they not only allow one another to be strong, but also maintain the resiliency and strength of their relationship as a whole; or, in systemic terms, the whole of their relationship becomes more than the sum of its parts (Becvar & Becvar, 2003).

It seems that these system values of strength, cooperation, support, and trust and their patterns and skills in dealing with problems and crises, established early on in their relationship, were reinforced by the occurrence of the rape and furthermore became paramount in restabilising their system in the chaotic aftermath of the rape as well as in the couple's longer term meaning making processes. During the interviews it became apparent that, in keeping with the couple and larger family members' construction of one another and their relationships as strong, Christelle also defines herself as a strong person.

> *Christelle: Ja…ek was, ek was maar 'n, 'n redelike…soos my pa-hulle sê…'n sterk persoon...*
> *Christelle: …En ek was baie kwaad, want ek het heeltyd gevra "hoekom", jy weet, hoekom gebeur 2 dinge op een slag, weet. Dit was, dit was vir my net bietjie te veel gewees. So, "eventually" ek het opgestaan en ek het besluit te hel daarmee. Ek gaan nie, ek gaan nie dat dit my af, afbring nie. Ek het opgestaan en ek het besluit ek gaan veg. Ek is 'n sterk persoon. Ek gaan nie dat dit my onderkry nie.*

From the above quotation it is clear that this definition and image of her as strong was in some ways a blessing to her, since it later served as an impetus for her to deal with the rape. However, it also became apparent during the interview that this image and definition initially contained the potential to become, and in some ways actually became, a burden to her. In this regard, it seems that in the chaotic immediate aftermath of the rape, her perceived strength may have served as a homeostatic element in the couple and larger family system by balancing and calming the emotional expressions of Brian and other family members. Christelle coming across as coping, or doing relatively fine given the circumstances (in their words, she was "oraait") seemingly gave other members time to express their shock and to adjust to the enormity of the situation and the chaos brought about by the rape, without having to deal with the intensity of her trauma.

However, the above also implies that at the time when she was severely traumatised by the rape, she was required to be the caregiver who had to help others by calming them down, or at least needed to appear outwardly calm so as to not add to other family members' distress. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the rape her needs, as a rape victim, were not met and it was at this point that her strength, which used to be an advantage, became a burden to her. This dynamic was also evident in the couple system, as Brian indicated that he initially found solace in the fact that Christelle appeared to be coping, and also that, at some point, she calmed him down.

> Brian: ...Uhm, ek wou maar net geweet het lat, of sy moes net vir my sekuriteit gegee het dat, dat sy, sy "oraait" is en, uh………toe, uh, was, was ek "oraait" gewees.
>
> Brian: Op die stadium wat ek daar aangekom het was sy Baie (sic) emosioneel en hartseer. Sy het dit later Beter (sic) hanteer en selfs vir my gesê ek moet kalmeer.

Taking a more circular perspective, one can hypothesise that the system requirement that she takes this position and role may have been functional as it simultaneously provided her with a diversion from the rape by focusing her attention on those around her, especially in the immediate aftermath of the attack. However, this dynamic and comments made by Brian and other family members in this regard also placed her in an extremely difficult position, as these comments may have communicated, and still may, to Christelle that her not coping, not being strong, or her showing vulnerability is not really an option nor something that Brian and the other family members, and therefore also the system, will be able to handle.

In this regard, it indeed seems that during the first couple of days after the rape had occurred, Christelle did not ask for help, withdrew from those around her and attempted to deal with the rape on her own. Thus, it would appear that the image of her as strong initially prevented her from addressing the trauma in more effective ways. However, at this point it seems that the distress of Brian and other family members has subsided enough to enable them to be more aware of and tolerate her distress and to more adequately acknowledge and respond to her trauma. They interpreted her withdrawal as a request for help and in particular Brian and her parents continued to manoeuvre to support her and to provide consolation and care, despite her withdrawal.

> Brian: ...Sy wil nie, jy weet, aan die begin wou sy nie regtig met iemand praat en so aan nie, weet, sy, sy't maar net daar by die huis gesit, jy weet, en, uh, ek het maar heeltyd vir haar gesê, jy weet, sy moenie "worry" daaroor nie, alles sal "oraait" wees en so aan, jy weet. Haar pa-hulle het, uh, ook…op haar 'n groot rol gespeel daarin en alles. En, uh, ja maar ons het gesit, op die ou einde toe het ons nou haar gehelp en, so…

It furthermore seems that this definition of her as a strong person also threatened to cut her off from possible additional professional assistance. She initially refused to approach crisis centres for assistance or information about how to deal with the rape. However, following support, suggestions and advice, from her father especially, she opted to eventually approach a rape crisis centre. At the time of the interviews, Christelle was still attending therapy at this crisis centre. It became apparent during the interview that Christelle presents with some characteristics typical of an acute stress reaction, such as an exaggerated startle response and dissociation. The information she receives from therapy seems to help not only her, but also Brian to understand and adjust to these responses, thereby also contributing to the overall adjustments and restabilisation of the couple system.

> *Christelle: ...Ek wou nie gaan nie, eerlikwaar. Ek het gesê ek het dit nie nodig nie. Ek was baie hardegat. En toe't my pa nou met my mooi gesels en toe sê hy nee, al wil jy nie gaan nie, maar gaan net, weet dit is altyd goed. Weet, dit gaan jou dalk help. Nie nou nie maar op die lang termyn gaan dit jou help. En "eventually" het ek gegaan, en ek, ek moet vir jou eerlikwaar sê dit het my baie gehelp. Dit het my verskriklik baie gehelp.*

However, when looked at in the larger context of the couple and family systems' other patterns and processes, it seems that the construction of strength as both an individual and relational trait is flexible enough to also include behaviour, such as seeking assistance, being helped and acknowledging difficulty in coping, as part of being strong. In this regard, the couple and larger family system follow well-established patterns of communicating about their problems, alerting other members to their plight and of seeking and offering help as and when required. The couple's communication pattern is also characterised by daily conversations, usually around bedtime, during which they connect and talk about the events of their day and share both good and troubling concerns and feelings. In this relational context, Christelle's withdrawal from Brian and from family members in a time of need, as well as her initial insistence that she would deal with the rape on her own, were in violation of all of these patterns. This, in turn, seemed to have set in motion various negative feedback loops within the couple system and also within the larger family system during which Brian and her father in particular maintained their efforts to get her to open up to them, to support her and to encourage her to seek any assistance she might need.

From the above it is clear that once the immediate chaos of the rape had settled somewhat, Brian and other system members were in turn able to contain Christelle's distress, trauma and emotions in a supportive and nurturing way. It seems that although Brian and the family were upset and concerned about her trauma, Christelle's emotional expressions as such were not threatening to their system. In this regard, Brian remarked that what would have been threatening to their system, would have been

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Christelle's not allowing them to come close to her and her not seeking assistance. It appears that in the unstable and chaotic post-rape context, Brian perceived changes to effective system patterns as more threatening to their relationship and also to the family, than the rape-trauma itself. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that, for Brian, Christelle opening up and allowing others to help her, fed back into their system in a way which he in turn experienced as helpful. In other words, in a circular loop, by allowing Brian and other family members to help her, she was helping them to restore their effective patterns of cooperation and openness about needing and accepting help. In this way her image as a strong person was maintained, and the patterns of cooperation and connectedness within the couple, and also between the couple and other family members were acknowledged and confirmed.

> *Brian: Want kyk ek, ek is maar, ek is maar iemand wat, ek is…soos ek gesê het, ek is baie kwaad gewees en so aan en ek is nog steeds kwaad. Maar ek dink as, as sy moes, uh, ineengestort het en nie, uh, gestaan het en gehelp het dat, weet, dat iemand haar help nie, en, weet, dat ons, uh, weer kan aangaan met ons lewens en so aan, dan, uh, sou ek ook heeltemal inmekaar gestort het, jy weet. So, uhm, ja, dit, dit is maar sy wat so sterk was wat my maar help en so aan. Tot so ver gehelp het ook……*
>
> *Navorser: OK, so vir jou lê 'n deel van Christelle se sterk wees daarin dat sy ander toegelaat het om weer naby haar te kom en haar te help?*
>
> *Brian: Ja, weer naby haar te kom en haar te help……*
>
> *Navorser: En op daai manier het sy weer vir jou gehelp?*
>
> *Brian: Vir my gehelp, ja……*

In addition to the above, Christelle's strength became a burden to her on a more individual level. In this regard, she initially struggled to accept that she had been raped. Although this is a struggle faced by most rape victims, the way in which it manifests will be different for every person and will also be partly determined by the social discourses prevalent in the victim's social context (Connop & Petrak, 2004; Fetchenhauer et al., 2005). It appears that for Christelle this struggle partially related to the incompatibility between the occurrence of the rape, her personal perspectives of and meanings she attached to rape and her image as a strong person. Another aspect that may also have added to this difficulty in dealing with the rape, is the general myth or belief of invulnerability that people often hold with regards to catastrophic events, in other words, people tend to believe that bad events only happen to other people (Crome & McCabe, 2001):

> *Christelle: …So, maar, in dieselfde tyd was ek baie hartseer…want jy hoor, jy hoor altyd van…die mense om jou wat dit mee gebeur…Jy besef nooit laat dit, dit KAN met jou gebeur nie. En…op daai stadium het ek, was ek kwaad en ek was hartseer omdat dit met my gebeur het en ek het nooit besef laat dit, laat dit met my kan gebeur nie…*

Christelle: ...So ek...weet, dit was vir my baie, dit was vir my 'n bitter pil om te sluk, om te weet dit het met my gebeur, weet.

From a systemic perspective, however, given that strength as an individual characteristic trait is co-constructed between system members, as well as that recursion is inherent in systems, Christelle's individual struggle could not not impact on the couple's relationship. Christelle reported feeling inferior and dirty and also that she could not look Brian in the eyes, which in turn seemed to have contributed to her abovementioned initial withdrawal from him. During the interviews it became apparent that her withdrawal was difficult and distressing for Brian, especially because his perception of her had not been changed by the rape. He still saw her as he did before the rape and responded to her accordingly by not accepting her withdrawal and manoeuvring for closeness and reassuring her. This, in turn, is likely to have served as feedback to her, dispelling her fears, adjusting her perception of herself and maintaining her resolve that she was strong enough to deal with the rape and that she would not allow the perpetrator or the fact that she was raped to define who she is.

Brian: ...En, so ek het haar nie anderste gesien as, as altyd, jy weet, dit was my vrou gewees, en, en...Daar was nou, OK, dit was nou net, daar was 'n probleem gewees, jy weet, en ek moes haar gehelp het daarmee, jy weet. So, nee, ek het haar nie anderster gesien as wat...Kyk, dit was moeilik gewees, uh, want alles verander, weet, dit, uh, of dit het verander...want, uhm, omdat...dit alles nou gebeur het en sy, uh, voel so, jy weet. Sy wil nie, jy weet, aan die begin wou sy nie regtig met iemand praat en so aan nie...

From the above it is possible to perceive that the system value of strength, and the definition of individuals as strong, served to restore some stability in the immediate aftermath of the rape, and in the longer term also served to re-establish patterns of seeking help. This allowed the influx of valuable information from therapy, which in turn bolstered their system's restabilisation processes and enabled the couple to begin the process of dealing with and integrating the rape. The fact that they could successfully restabilise and that they are in the process of coping with the ordeal, furthermore feeds back into their relationship confirming the strength of their relationship, as well as of them as individuals.

Brian:...En ek dink "eventually" met die navorsing wat gedoen word en so aan, uh, kan dit miskien ander mense help, uh, om ook, ook sterk te wees en ook deur sulke goeters te kom, jy weet. Ek weet daar is baie mense wat nie so sterk is nie, jy weet. En, weet, wat dit nie miskien so goed hanteer soos wat ons dit hanteer nie. Uh, weet, daar is mense wat sal selfmoord pleeg oor sulke goed en, so aan, jy weet. En miskien, weet, later sal dit miskien van daai mense help om dit nie te doen nie en daardeur te werk, jy weet. En op die ou einde bo uit te kom, en, weet,

sterk uit te kom en te besluit dit gaan hulle nie onderkry nie, so. Ek dink, weet, as iemand anderster daaruit kan leer en…

7.4.2 The saving grace of pre-trauma functionality and flexibility

From the interviews it became apparent that the couple's relationship is clearly defined as parallel, and that they have negotiated, agreed upon and settled their roles and responsibilities in both the couple and parental subsystems. As discussed in chapter three, their defining their relationship as parallel means Christelle and Brian's interactional pattern is characterised by the exchange of a combination of complementary and symmetrical behaviours, and also indicates that they alternate between the one-up and one-down positions in accordance with context, individual and system requirements. In addition, and in keeping with a parallel definition, power and control in their relationship are shared. In this regard, Christelle and Brian both feel they have a voice, or hold an important position, in their relationship and also that their respective voices are heard. Furthermore, both feel they contribute to, and they also acknowledge one another's contribution to, their relationship. The equality in their relationship is confirmed by Brian's assertion that neither of them intimidates the other and by Christelle's remark that they complement one another well.

> *Brian: Ek voel ek het net so 'n groot sê in ons verhouding met mekaar sowel as met ons kinders as wat my vrou het en dat ons mekaar nie intemideur* (sic) *nie.*
> *Christelle: Ja ek het 'n groot plek in ons verhouding en na die verkragting probeer ek hard om daai plek te behou.*
> *Christelle: …So ons vul mekaar baie goed aan. As ek dit vir jou so kan stel.*

The equality and sharing of power in their relationship are especially evident in the couple's decision making pattern, which is a joint process that entails consulting or checking with one another before certain decisions are taken. This does not seem to be indicative of over-dependence, because they acknowledge the fact that both of them are more than capable of making decisions on their own. Rather, this joint decision making process is part of their power sharing approach to dealing with and managing their relational and family life and is also reflective of their interdependence and cooperation as partners.

> *Brian: Ja, ek, ek dink ons…ek sal byvoorbeeld iets doen en ek sal haar eers vra of wat dink sy, sal ek dit kan doen, of kan ek dit doen. Uh, alhoewel…ek eintlik weet ek kan dit maar doen, uh, of dis my besluit eintlik, jy weet. Maar ek sal altyd na haar toe gaan en vir haar vra: "Of kan ons dit doen?" of "Dink jy dis reg?", jy weet. En dieselfde met haar ook. Sy sal ook na my toe kom en vir my sê: "Dink jy dis reg?" of, uhm, "Wat moet ons doen?" of so aan. Alhoewel sy*

weet sy kan maar aangaan en dit doen, jy weet…Ja, ek dink ons, ons het altyd maar, uh, daai ruimte wat ons met mekaar kan gesels en, uhm, besluite neem en so aan.

As mentioned above, their roles in the couple and parental subsystems have been settled. In the couple subsystem Brian occupies the role of the primary financial provider, whereas Christelle occupies more of a secondary or complementary role and is intermittently employed. Christelle occupies the role of the primary home-maker and child carer. She is very protective of the couple's children and selects her employment prospects based on opportunities and positions which accommodate this role; for example before Thomas's birth she worked at a nursery school where she could be in close proximity to Tessa while being at work. During the interviews it was apparent that they are both satisfied with the more traditional division of roles and responsibilities in the couple subsystem and also that they mutually respect and support one another's position and role. Brian came across as admiring Christelle's ability to deal with and handle the children as a stay-at-home mother. In turn, Christelle supports his position as the sole financial provider and appreciates that this responsibility sometimes makes it impossible for him to be there for his family in other ways. This was especially evident in the post-rape context in that she continuously reassured him that his self-blame and guilt were unwarranted as his work responsibilities had required him to leave the morning she was raped.

> *Brian: Sy's 'n baie goeie ma, vir altwee. Sy kyk elke dag na hulle. En oor naweke as ek by die huis is, en ek moet net vir 'n rukkie na hulle kyk, dan wil ek mal word.* (Lag) *So, ja, sy moet nogal goed wees om na hulle altwee te kan kyk.*

In the parental subsystem they also mutually respect and support each other as parents. They seem to balance an appreciation of their unique and individual approaches to parenting with a shared understanding of what parenting is about and what position and role each of them takes with regards to parenting responsibilities. In this regard, there is consensus between them that Brian is the primary disciplinarian, whereas Christelle is the primary caregiver. However, although settled, these roles and responsibilities are not fixed and they also assume the other's role and responsibilities when required to do so by circumstances or context. Their shared understanding and cooperation as parents were also observed during the interviews and it was possible to see how they complemented one another as parents, taking equal turns in tending to the children's needs and also in how they affectionately commented on one another's approach to and capabilities as a parent.

> *Brian: Ja, miskien moet jy haar vra* (lag)*. Ek weet nie, ek weet nie…ek is partykeer kwaai hierso en so, ja, ek weet nie…*
>
> *Christelle: Ag, hy is 'n baie goeie pa. Hy is baie streng, maar hy is 'n baie goeie pa…Nie TE streng nie, maar streng…strenger as ek…* (kyk vir Brian, lag)*.*

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Navorser: So, Brian is die strenger ouer?

Brian: Ja, ongelukkig moet dit nou pa wees.

Christelle: Maar die hartjie kan ook lekker sag raak…

Brian: Jaaa……

Their equality and cooperation are also evident in other relational processes and patterns. In this regard, Christelle and Brian enjoy equal access to system resources such as support, care and nurturance. They furthermore seem to allocate these resources based on an awareness of their own needs, fine attunement to and acknowledgement of one another's needs as well as consideration of context requirements. This in turn makes for a balanced, mutual and functional flow in terms of these resources. Furthermore, the couple is able to maintain an appropriately balanced flow of these resources in their day-to-day lives, as well as during times of turmoil. In the past they successfully dealt with crisis situations which required them to alternate between the positions of being supported or cared for and offering support or providing care. For example, when Brian needed support after one of his friends passed away, Christelle took the position of providing support and care. They also had to deal with situations which required them to take both positions simultaneously in order to deal effectively with the crisis. For example, when the couple fell pregnant, they both needed support, but also had to provide support to each other in terms of facing the challenge of the pregnancy and dealing with the initial unfavourable responses of some family members. The fact that they were able to maintain an appropriate flow of system resources even during crisis situations is likely to have fed back into their system, confirming the effectiveness of the way in which they in general manage and allocate these resources. This in turn is likely to have strengthened these patterns, contributing to the overall functionality and stability of their system.

From the above it is clear that Christelle and Brian function well as a team or a unit. However, it also seems that this togetherness was not achieved by making undue sacrifices in terms of individual autonomy. The latter was still evident in their appreciation and acknowledgement of the value each of them add to their relationship as well as in their mutual belief and trust in the other's capabilities to make acceptable and prudent decisions for their family. Furthermore, in the past their individual autonomy has also helped the couple to deal with crisis situations, as it meant that even during times of turmoil one of them remained strong enough to temporarily allow the other to be more vulnerable.

The above mutual and balanced flow of system resources, the couple's settled roles and agreed upon division of responsibilities and their parallel relationship definition, made for a functional, flexible and resilient relationship before the rape. The fact that both Christelle and Brian were satisfied with the state of their relationship, furthermore served to maintain these relational patterns. Despite the

functionality and flexibility of the couple's relationship before the rape and the fact that they have previously successfully dealt with stressful situations, it was evident that they had never before experienced any situation that brought about so much trauma and chaos or made such extreme demands on their system.

In the first couple of days and weeks after the rape Christelle and Brian were extremely traumatised and both experienced and expressed strong emotions such as extreme sadness and aggression, and also shame, guilt, self-blame, irritation and frustration. Christelle needed to be consoled, calmed down, reassured, made to feel safe and her feelings of shame needed to be addressed, whereas Brian needed to be consoled, calmed down and his feelings of self-blame and guilt needed to be addressed. Thus, both of them needed support, care and nurturance, but were also required to provide these to one another at higher levels than ever before. As could be expected, this presented the couple system with huge challenges, since it suddenly had to contend with a substantial increase in the demand for these resources. In addition, their system also required enough flexibility to tolerate rapid fluctuations in the flow of these resources as well as rapid alternations in the positions of providing and receiving care, nurturance and support.

In the immediate aftermath of the rape the couple attempted to deal with these challenges and demands by moving from their well-established parallel (i.e. exchanging a combination of symmetrical and complementary behaviours) interactional pattern to a more complementary pattern. In this regard, as was evident in the discussion of the previous theme, on the day of the rape, Christelle was the strong, or level-headed, one who mostly provided support, care and calmed Brian down while he was shocked and reacted to the rape. Brian responded to this change in their interactional pattern by accepting her efforts to calm him down, which was still congruent with their system's habitual way of functioning. However, although this shift was effective in terms of adjusting for and containing the immediate escalating emotional expression in their system and therefore also maintaining some system stability, on an individual level it is clear that the couple initially struggled to concurrently meet both partners' needs in this extreme context.

In the days following the rape, the couple system maintained sufficient flexibility and functionality to allow Christelle and Brian to alternate their above positions. During this time Brian assumed the position or role of predominantly providing support, care, nurturance, consolation and closeness to Christelle. Yet, at this point it seems that rather than accepting the support, comfort and closeness Brian offered, Christelle repeatedly distanced herself from him due to feeling dirty and ashamed, and she initially attempted to deal with the rape on her own. Thus, the shift to a predominantly complementary

pattern was maintained in the days following the rape, but in a way which was not congruent with their system's habitual way of functioning. Given that the couple had previously dealt with everyday situations and crises as a team, Christelle's distancing herself from him in this way represented a major departure from the couple's teamwork approach and give-and-take patterns. Furthermore, this shift also implied that the mutual flow of resources between them was disrupted, owing to the fact that Christelle's withdrawal from Brian not only had the implication that she did not accept the support and care he offered, but also that he did not have access to the support and care usually available in their relationship. The disruption of these patterns and especially the disruption of the flow of resources between them amplified their individual distress and anxiety in the post-rape context, severely destabilising their system. Furthermore, these disruptions also initially restricted the couple from adjusting those patterns so that they could meet the extreme demands of the post-rape context. To adequately deal with the rape, the couple needed to return to their parallel interactional pattern. This meant that they needed to return to a pattern where offering by one was met with receiving by the other, giving was met with taking, and closeness was met with closeness.

The impact of the rape and subsequent increasing instability in the couple subsystem also reverberated in the parental subsystem, upsetting their usual roles and changing the way the couple interacted as parents and with their children. In this regard, their established roles and positions as disciplinarian and caregiver and "less" and "more" strict were overturned in that Christelle uncharacteristically disciplined Tessa more frequently and even in situations where Brian felt it was not necessarily warranted. Furthermore, Christelle described feeling aggressive towards Tessa, which was not in keeping with her role as caregiver, and also added to her and the couple's distress and confusion. Since the couple's open communication pattern had been disrupted, their usual means for discussing, addressing and clarifying their concerns about these changes were not available, which in turn again amplified the instability in their system.

Such changes in a couple's usual pattern of interaction and roles are common in rape-traumatised couples (Balcom, 1996; White & Rollins, 1981). These changes contributed to increasing conflict between Christelle and Brian, which in turn amplified the anxiety and tension brought about by the trauma, further destabilising their system. With their usual internal system patterns disrupted, these patterns could not effectively reduce the instability and the couple system's survival was increasingly under threat. Amidst this chaos, however, it seems that their system's boundaries remained functional and permeable allowing information and people to appropriately enter into the system. In this regard, the couple's families became involved in various ways, such as supporting and consoling the couple, providing advice and temporarily taking over the care of the children.

In addition to providing support, it also seems that Christelle's father was triangulated into the couple's relationship. According to family systems theory a dyad forms a triangle when it is under stress and unstable (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Hoffman, 1981). Triangles can be both functional and dysfunctional, depending on who is triangulated, how the triangle impacts on the dyad or on the triangulated person as well as on other relationships in the larger system, and what the function and duration of the triangle is. From the couple's account it was clear that this was a temporary and functional triangulation. In this regard, her father mediating between them, calming them down, offering advice and assistance to both, and refocusing their attention on their relationship and on one another's needs, seem to have served the function of alleviating much tension and anxiety within their dyad. His triangulation into their relationship appeared to have played a significant part in refocusing the couple system's energy away from the rape and onto one another and their relationship. Perhaps most importantly though, the information he brought to the system resonated with the couple's pre-existing patterns of awareness of and attunement to one another's needs and emotions, their former balanced and mutual flow of system resources as well as their joint approach to dealing with crises and problems.

In this way her father being triangulated into their dyad seems to have given momentum to Brian's attempts to restore their former interactional patterns, amplifying various negative feedback cycles to establish the former status quo in terms of their patterns of fine attunement to one another, cooperation, joint approach to problem solving and the balanced flow of system resources. As their system slowly restabilised, the flexibility and resiliency of the couple's relationship allowed them to make the necessary adjustments to accommodate rapid fluctuations and alternations in order to adequately provide one another with the increased levels of support and care they both needed. Thus, they were able to rapidly alternate between the one-up and one-down positions of caregiver and caretaker, the strong one and the weak one, the emotional one and the level-headed one. This gives both of them the opportunity and space to express and deal with their individual responses to the rape in a containing environment, while their mutually supporting one another means that neither of them will become overburdened. The effectiveness of this adjustment by their system is evident in the fact that both indicated during the interview and in the written reflections that they could not have gotten through the ordeal without the support, care and understanding provided by the other.

> *Christelle: ...behalwe dat ek baie bang was en hy alles probeer doen het om my veilig te laat voel nie... My man het na my omgesien... Binne ons verhouding het ons mekaar onder steun* (sic). *My man het my baie onder steun* (sic) *sonder hom kon ek nie daar deer* (sic) *kom nie.*
>
> *Navorser: So tussendeur hoor ek ook hoe julle mekaar ondersteun het, en hoe julle met mekaar gesels het na die verkragting. Kan julle my meer daarvan vertel en is daar iets wat julle anders sou wou gedoen het?*

Christelle: Nee, ek glo nie rêrig nie. Hy was maar altyd daar gewees. As ek 'n drukkie of 'n ding nodig gehad het, dan was hy maar daar gewees (lag). *Die ondersteuning wat ons van mekaar af gekry het was genoeg gewees…* (Brian begin praat)

Brian: Ja, ek dink dit was goed gewees. Daar, daar is nie regtig iets wat ek anders sou wou gehad het nie…

Following her father's subsequent disengagement from this triangle, this process is being maintained as the couple continues to be aware of the impact of the rape on one another and on their relationship, without letting the rape become an organising principle in their system. In this regard, they make connections between what is happening in their relationship, and between them, in the present and how this may or may not relate to the rape; they then discuss, work on and give attention to the issue as is required at that moment in time. In other words, they deal with the lasting impact of the rape in accordance with another of their well-established patterns, namely giving attention to and dealing with issues and problems as they arise. Thus, the couple is able to maintain a balance between not unduly focusing on the rape, but also not ignoring or denying its impact. This in all likelihood will prevent the rape from being triangulated into their relationship, either overtly or covertly. They also expect that this is how they will continue to deal with the rape in future, for as long as it is necessary.

Christelle: Weet jy, as, as ons rêrig werk daarvan maak om dit wat gebeur het in die verlede te hou, weet, en dit daar te los, en dit nie, weet…kyk opbring gaan dit kom, jy weet. Jy gaan nou en dan daaroor praat en soos wat jy aangaan gaan dit beter raak. Weet, dit gaan, dit gaan nie altyd, dit gaan nie, weet dit gaan nie iets wees waar jy sommer net oor gaan praat nie. Maar as jy daaroor moet praat, sal dit, dit sal nie so hartseer en teer saak wees, weet, op 'n langer termyn nie.

Brian: Ek dink ook soos, soos sy gesê het, weet, met tyd sal, sal dit beter word en, uh, ons, ons sal…uh, of alles, die, die seer sal, sal seker ligter wees, jy weet. En ons twee sal natuurlik daaroor praat en so aan, maar, maar dit sal, uh, dit sal nie meer so, so erg wees soos wat dit eintlik nou, uhm, is nie.

From the above it is evident that the couple's relationship was significantly impacted on by the rape. However, the pre-existing functionality, resilience and flexibility of their system allowed the couple to fairly quickly restabilise and make the necessary adjustments so as to begin to deal with the rape effectively.

7.4.3 Relational closeness and connectedness interrupted

Before the rape, Christelle and Brian established and regulated their level of relational closeness and distance within certain parameters and in this regard they defined their relationship as close and connected. This connectedness and closeness manifest in, and are also reciprocally maintained by, various patterns in their relationship such as their communication pattern, physical and emotional intimacy, their attunement to one another and how they support, care for and nurture one another. Before the rape, the couple's communication pattern was characterised by openness and the couple made time at the end of each day to touch base with one another. During this time they share and talk about anything that needs to be discussed, address problems, or just in general share the events of their day with one another.

> *Brian: Ons sal gereeld met mekaar gesels en ek dink dit is maar oor iets van alles. Sy steek nie iets vir my weg en ek ook nie vir haar so as iets pla dan praat ons eerder daaroor.*
> *Christelle: Ons het goeie kominukasie* (sic) *en het nog altyd gehaat* (sic). *Ons gesels gereeld veral in die aande voor ons gaan slaap, terwyl ons bad of in die bed lê. Ons gesels oor werk, ons kinders, familie en enige iets verder wat maar op kom* (sic). *Ons is baie na aan mekaar, dink die sele* (sic). *En goed met mekaar praat oor enige iets. Ons het nie 'n afstand tussen ons nie.*

Their open communication and fine attunement to one another brought about, and seems to maintain and strengthen, a sense of sameness, familiarity and a perception that they could predict one another's thoughts, words or actions. Although this perception may potentially contribute to misinterpretation, misunderstanding and the communication trap of mind reading, the risk is mediated by the openness of their communication pattern and the inclusion of a rule according to which they "check in" or "check" ideas with one another on a regular basis, rather than just making and acting on assumptions.

> *Christelle: Ons dink baie dieselfde. Hy, hy sal aan iets dink en dan weet ek al klaar, weet, hy, hy beplan dit of dit of dit. Ek sal net begin om vir hom iets te sê, dan sal hy sê "Nee, hy dink nie dit sal werk nie" of "Ja, nee dis reg. Jy kan dit maar doen". Of wat ook al. So ons vul mekaar baie goed aan. As ek dit vir jou so kan stel.*

Furthermore, the combination of the "checking" rule with other rules, such as not keeping secrets and rather discussing and clarifying problems and concerns as they emerge, also ensures that the couple does not get caught in communication traps too often and keeps their communication pattern functional and effective. From the above it is evident that the couple's communication pattern is an integral part of their connectedness and closeness and also that it facilitates their connectedness on other levels.

This experience of knowing one another's thoughts or feelings reflects their pattern of fine attunement to one another in general and also to their needs, emotions and moods in particular. Being so finely attuned to one another means that they are able to fairly accurately anticipate an issue and then provide adequate and satisfying support, care and nurturance. In turn, this is experienced as an intimate connectedness which transcends the need for words. In addition, the couple also attaches great meaning to sexual intimacy and shares the belief that it is an important part of having a good relationship. This furthermore strengthens their experience of their relationship as close and connected, because they not only fulfill their own and one another's sexual needs, but this also serves as communication and confirmation between the partners that they value, desire and need one another.

The disconnecting impact of the rape is evident in this couple on both an individual and relational level. It seems that following the rape, Christelle and Brian felt disconnected from their identities. Christelle described extreme confusion, shock and feelings of unrealness. Also, she indicated that in the first week following the rape she felt like a stranger to herself and for a while she felt that she had lost her womanhood. She expressed a very powerful image which described how profoundly she had been violated and how disconnected she felt from herself by likening the rape to her soul being ripped from her body. Similarly, Brian described confusion, shock, feelings of unrealness and disorientation after he was informed of the rape. It seems that his disconnectedness from his identity was just as profound, since he felt he had in some ways lost his humanness. His disconnectedness and disorientation following the rape even seemed to filter through during the interview when he recounted what happened on that day. He often paused and used interjections as he struggled to find words.

> *Brian* (with reference to the telephonic conversation he had with his father-in-law shortly after the rape occurred)*: ...Ek gaan die naweek geniet, ek gaan visvang. En, uh, toe sê hy vir my, uh...en toe, uh, toe vra ek vir hom hoekom moet ek huis toe kom. Hoekom, uh...toe kan ek aan sy stem hoor daar's iets fout. Toe sê hy vir my dat Christelle verkrag is en ek moet dadelik huis toe kom. En, vir 'n oomblik was dit, ek het nie geweet wat om te doen nie. Ek, ek kon nie eers my kar oopsluit, of in my kar klim of iets nie...En vir 'n oomblik het ek toe nou nie geweet wat om te...of ek moet ry of bly, ek was baie deurmekaar gewees. En toe't ek besluit, OK, ek gaan net in my kar klim en ry. Ek gaan net ry. En, inteendeel, ek het in my kar geklim en, ek het 'n draai gery, ek het verkeerde kant toe gery, en alles, en omgedraai en toe nou, uh, gery na die, op die pad wat ek altyd gewoonlik maar werk toe ry. En, uh, ja, soos sy sê, ek, ek het gejaag soos 'n mal ding...*

From the above it is clear that Christelle and Brian were severely traumatised and that what they experienced and described seems coherent with the post-traumatic symptom of dissociation (American

Psychiatric Association, 2000). Understanding dissociation as disconnectedness makes it possible to extend the impact of an individually experienced and observed symptom to the realm of the interpersonal. In this regard, being and feeling so profoundly disconnected from their individual selves complicated the couple's ability to connect with one another, thereby disrupting their usual patterns of connectedness mentioned above. The disruption of these patterns brought about a fluctuation towards distance which exceeded the parameters of their previously agreed upon level of relational closeness. Given the former stability of these pre-existing patterns as well as the mutually satisfying and rewarding level of their relational closeness before the rape, the couple was particularly distressed by these disruptions and changes. These disruptions and their distress at them furthermore fed into and exacerbated the chaos, instability and distress brought about by the rape.

In this regard, perhaps most threatening and destabilising to their system was the disruption of their communication pattern because this pattern grounded their connectedness on all levels of their relationship. Brian reported that Christelle initially did not want to talk to anyone and also withdrew from everyone, including him. This represented a complete departure from the couple's usual open communication pattern where they could talk and share anything with one another. As mentioned in the previous theme, it was also different from their usual joint approach to crisis situations, such as how they dealt with the unexpected pregnancy years earlier, as well as how they dealt with the death of Brian's friend. Although these changes were distressing to both Christelle and Brian, it seems that at least some of Brian's distress was alleviated by his seeing and understanding Christelle's withdrawal as part of her trauma. This perspective seemingly allowed him to continue to manoeuvre for closeness and to re-establish the status quo in terms of their communication by reassuring and consoling her both verbally and non-verbally, despite her withdrawal.

In addition to the above, in the days and weeks after the rape, their system was furthermore destabilised by other disconcerting changes in how they interacted and communicated with one another. In this regard, the couple reported that they became frustrated and irritated with each other, as well as with their children. As mentioned in the previous theme, in the parental subsystem this manifested in changes in their respective positions as primary disciplinarian and primary caregiver. In the couple subsystem this manifested in increasing conflict and verbal aggression between Christelle and Brian, as they clashed substantially more than usual and also about things over which they had previously never clashed. The fact that this was different from their usual pattern of conflict management, and that they could not resolve the conflict and their concerns about the aggression because of the disruption of their communication pattern, furthermore exacerbated the couple's distress and destabilised their system.

Christelle: ...Maar ek was ook (Tessa vereis Christelle se aandag)...*...maar...ek het verstaan dat hy kwaad is, maar dit is ook nie my skuld dat hy kwaad is nie. En...so, ons het, ons het mekaar baie, ons het baie baklei en baie vasgesit oor klein goedjies, weet, maar omdat ons ons frustrasie op mekaar uitgehaal het...dit was bietjie meer as, as gewoonlik...baie meer as gewoonlik...*

It seems that during this time Brian attempted to contain the escalation of conflict between them by often withdrawing from their conversations and interactions when Christelle became angry, approaching her again later and attempting to conduct another conversation. By returning later and again manoeuvring for closeness he also attempted to contain the escalating distance between them. It also seems that in this way, he manoeuvred for a return to their former patterns of communication, conflict resolution and crisis management, and ultimately to re-establish their former patterns of connectedness. However, his manoeuvres and the behaviours that were exchanged in response to these manoeuvres were also different from the couple's usual approach to dealing with problems, namely discussing issues and problems openly as they came up and not withdrawing from such conversations. Thus, their usual sequence of dealing with relational problems changed from an approach-approach sequence to an approach-attack-withdraw-approach sequence.

Brian: ...Dan het sy (Christelle) *onnodig met haar* (Tessa) *baklei, jy weet, maar en dan...ek kan nie regtig met haar* (Christelle) *baklei nie, want dit is nie eintlik haar skuld nie, jy weet, so. Dit was moeilik gewees, uh……Met my, as, toe sy ongeduldig met my was, jy weet, ek het nie, ek het geweet hoekom en so aan en daarom het ek my maar net nie regtig aan haar gesteur nie en ek sal omdraai en loop en, uh, later weer met haar gesels, of, en so aan, uhm. En, uhm, as sy maar later weer kwaad, kwaad word en so aan, jy weet, dan sal ek maar weer omdraai en dan net weer loop. En maar weer later probeer. Jy weet, so, ek het geweet met my, jy weet, was, was dit eintlik "oraait" gewees...*

From the above one gains a sense of the severity of the rape's disconnecting impact on their usual patterns of interaction and communication in that all these patterns were disrupted or altered in some way. However, from a systemic perspective one would consider the interpersonal significance and communicative value of these changed interactional sequences, increasing conflict and frustration, irritation and aggression towards one another. In the chaotic post-rape context these emotions and changes seemed to communicate their distress to one another and also fulfilled the function of triggering manoeuvres to re-establish the status quo in terms of their communication and problem solving patterns, to retore the flow of resources between them and ultimately to return to their former patterns of connectedness. Thus, looking at these changes not as barriers to their connectedness, but as

alternative ways of maintaining connectedness in a relational context where habitual or pre-existing patterns have been disrupted, it becomes possible to regard these emotions and interactions as functional, although distressing.

It seems that helpful information from external systems, such as Christelle's parents as well as from the rape crisis centre, strengthened the negative feedback cycles already evident in Brian's manoeuvres to restabilise their system and restore their formerly effective patterns of connectedness. In this regard, therapy seems to have provided much information which assisted Christelle in understanding her experiences, such as the flashbacks, and also her emotional responses. Her sharing this information with Brian broadens the couple's understanding of the rape-trauma, enhancing their ability to deal with the rape. This in turn feeds back into their relationship, lessening their distress and anxiety, and thereby contributing to system stability. Perhaps most significantly, her sharing this information with Brian continues to create opportunities for the couple to openly discuss and share their experiences, decreasing the distance between them.

At the time of the interviews it seemed that the couple's former patterns of connectedness were, to a large extent, restabilised and functional again. The couple now deals with the rape in accordance with their open and effective communication pattern and has returned to discussing everything with one another. In this regard, they discussed the rape itself, and Christelle indicated that although it was uncomfortable, it was not that difficult because of the love they share. Furthermore, they now speak freely about the rape as it comes up and Christelle indicated that she often shares with Brian, at the end of the day, when she has experienced reminders of the rape. The couple is also again attuned to one another's needs and emotions: for example Christelle recognises that Brian needs to be reassured about his feelings of guilt and self-blame, whereas Brian continues to reassure Christelle by hugging and consoling her. From the above, it is also evident that the mutual flow of support, care and nurturance between them has been restored.

In addition to the above, the disruption of their usual patterns of connectedness also manifested in their physical closeness and sexual intimacy. In this regard, despite the restabilisation of the above patterns, the couple still struggles to deal with the disconnecting and disrupting impact of the rape on this intimacy. Following the rape Christelle described herself as feeling inferior, dirty, ashamed and unable to look Brian in the eyes, which initially manifested in her distancing herself from Brian physically, not wanting him to even touch her. Thus, the way in which Christelle experienced and perceived herself fed back into their system, changing the way the couple interacted with one another on a physical level as well, despite the fact that Brian did not perceive her differently. Given their usual pattern of physical

closeness and the meaning that both of them attach to sexual intimacy, Brian and Christelle were particularly distressed by this change and by the fact that even non-sexual physical closeness became unbearable and was avoided.

> *Brian: ......In die begin wou, wou sy nie regtig gehad het, jy weet, ek moes aan haar vat of enige iets nie. Uh...weet...en ek het dit verstaan, uhm, dit, dit...maar dit, dit, dit, dit is moeilik weet, as, uh, jy weet vir ons, ons het 'n baie goeie, uh, seksuele verhouding gehad voor die tyd. En, uh, jy weet van, om daai goeie verhouding te hê tot, uhm, dit het nou gebeur en nou is daar nie 'n, daai, daai verhouding nie, jy weet. Dit was moeilik gewees. Vir my veral, weet, ek is maar 'n man, jy weet, so, uh. Ja, dit was moeilik vir my gewees, uh, en nou nog...Dit, dit is nou...dis baie beter. Uhm, daar is nog, jy weet, tye wat, uh, ons maar, uhm, of waaraan ons nog werk, jy weet en so aan, maar ek dink dit is nou baie beter as, as net, as direk daarna, so, uhm...*

In addition to being obliged to deal with the impact of the rape on their non-sexual physical closeness, the couple had to adjust to and deal with the ongoing impact and intrusion of the rape on the most intimate aspect of their relationship and their connectedness to one another, and is still in the process of doing so. In this regard, Christelle described experiencing post-traumatic flashbacks during sexual intercourse with Brian. Thus, in a sense, their close and intimate union has now become contaminated by the distressing presence of the rapist. Given the importance and meaning that both of them attach to this aspect of their relationship, this change initially fed back into their system in a way which furthermore amplified their system's instability and the couple's distress not only by emphasising Christelle's individual disconnectedness, but also presenting a real threat to their connectedness as a couple and ultimately to the survival of their relationship. Furthermore, sexual intercourse is often a soothing and calming activity for couples, especially in times of stress and chaos (Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998). Given the fact that sexual intercourse tends to trigger these flashbacks, their sexual closeness continues to be at risk of losing its soothing and calming function, as it may invoke anxiety and tension for both Christelle and Brian, as can be seen from the following quotation. When this happens and the couple cannot contain or deal with the anxiety and tension by openly communicating about it, it is likely to complicate the above restabilisation process or bring about renewed instability once the system has restabilised.

> *Christelle: ...Uhm, in die begin dan, weet, dit is asof jy, weet, daai een se gesig hier voor jou sien. Ek het hard probeer om dit, weet, uit te sluit, maar jy, dis moeilik, jy kry dit nie altyd weet, net dat jy dit uitsluit en besluit, ja gaan jy nou dit is my man nie. En ek moes baie keer vir myself gesê het "Christelle, dis jou man, dis nie iemand wat jou wil seermaak nie"...en dis dinge wat moet, "eventually" moet dit gebeur, weet, want so iets kan jou, kan jou hele huwelik,*

weet, omvergooi. En, uhm, so in die begin was dit baie moeilik gewees…Daar is nog baie dingetjies, wat weet moet aan gewerk word…

Christelle: Die seksuele aspek in ons verhouding is vir my baie belangrik, dis 'n groot deel van 'n verhouding sonder 'n goeie sex (sic) *lewe kan jy nie 'n goeie verhouding hê nie. Ja die verkragting het 'n…inpak gehaat* (sic)*, maar ons het daar aan* (sic) *saam gewerk. Hy het verstaan en my nie gedruk nie.*

From the above it is clear that the couple approaches and deals with the impact of the rape on their sexual intimacy together. They are both sensitive to and attend to one another's needs. In this regard, Brian supports Christelle by being understanding, reassuring and consoling her when needed and by not pressuring her to engage in sexual activity when she does not feel comfortable. Christelle, in turn, recognises Brian's needs and the fact that the couple must slowly resume their sexual activities. Furthermore, the restabilisation of and their return to their former open communication pattern, their pattern of attunement to one another's needs and the restoration of the mutual flow of support, care and nurturance between them also seem to facilitate the difficulties they still face in terms of sexual intimacy.

As is evident from the above, the rape impacted on the couple's relationship by severely disrupting their patterns of connectedness, manifesting in a departure from their usual ways of being and interacting with one another. This meant that their relational closeness fluctuated and exceeded their system's parameters for distance. The couple system was destabilised and its survival was threatened, setting in motion various negative feedback cycles internal and external to the couple system in order to correct these deviations. In this way the disrupting and disconnecting impact of the rape was recursively impacted and contained by their pre-existing patterns of connectedness and closeness and the couple was able to restabilise their system and restore the functionality of these patterns.

However, as is clear from the discussion, this process is still ongoing. It seems that at this point the couple's awareness of the rape's impact on their relationship, their awareness of their pre-existing patterns of connectedness and changes to these patterns, as well as the effectiveness of these patterns in dealing with the rape, is likely to maintain their restabilisation process. In addition to confirming the effectiveness and mutually satisfying and rewarding nature of their patterns of connectedness and closeness, it also seems that the experience of going through the ordeal of the rape served to amplify these processes in their relationship, as they now experience their relationship as changed for the better, and as closer and more connected than ever before. This seems to be partially centred on what they could have lost and what they have gained through this experience. They seem to deny any permanent

losses, and rather focus on or emphasise the gains. By minimising their losses and reframing the rape as less catastrophic than it could have been, they are able to minimise and contain its impact on their relationship. Futhermore it also seems that awareness of the possible losses feeds back into their system in a way that increases the time they spent together, increases mutual understanding, love and appreciation for one another, which in turn, contributes to them experiencing their relationship as closer and more connected.

> *Brian: Ek dink ek kan met eerlikheid in my hart sê ons is nader as wat ons nog ooit was dit was wel 'n slegte ding wat gebeur het maar dit het ons nader aan mekaar gebring.*
>
> *Christelle: Vir my is dit van…asof ons mekaar baie meer waardeer, as, as voorheen. Voorheen kon jy dalk nog, weet gesê het: "Ag nee wat, ek gaan hom nie vra nie, weet. Dis nie, ek gaan dit nou maar doen en klaar kry". Maar ek dink ons wa, ons waardeer, ons waardeer mekaar baie meer as wat ons voorheen mekaar waardeer het…*
>
> *Brian: Ek dink soos, soos sy gesê het, weet, ons, is, uh, ons verhouding is uh, meer, uh, weet ons…is meer nader aan mekaar as, as tevore wat ons was, jy weet. En selfs met die kinders, en so aan, jy weet, uh,…ons het…dit, dit is ook, weet, ons sal meer aandag aan hulle gee en, uh, saam met hulle eerder speel voordat ons iewers heen gaan, jy weet of so iets. So, ek dink vir my is dit maar net ons verhouding as 'n familie wat, uh, wat beter geword het.*

Although they experience these changes as brought about by the rape and seem to doubt that another experience may have affected them in a similar way, it is important to keep in mind that the patterns of closeness and connectedness were pre-existing in their system. In keeping with the systemic concept of structure determinism, their system functioned in a way which allowed these patterns to be amplified, rather than the amplification of other newer patterns such as distance. It is furthermore evident that the system's rules and patterns were flexible enough to allow temporary changes and to also adapt to these changes and integrate them in a way which strengthened their system rather than destroyed it.

7.4.4 Protecting and being protected

The occurrence of the rape also brought to the fore the system value of protectiveness. During and in the immediate aftermath of the rape, protection became a prominent concern for both Christelle and Brian. This is to be expected, given the nature of the trauma, the bodily harm and serious threat of death during the attack. This protectiveness also manifested recursively in that just as much as Christelle was immediately concerned about protecting the children and Brian, on being informed of the rape Brian's main concern was getting home and protecting Christelle and the children. In the

immediate aftermath of the rape, their focus on protection possibly initially served the function of directing their attention away from the rape and onto one another and their children.

> *Brian: ...ek het nie regtig gedink aan enige iets behalwe om By* (sic) *my vrou en kinders te kom en net, te weet dat hulle veilig is en dat ek daar is om hulle vas te hou.*
>
> *Christelle: Ek wou, eerlik, ek wou hom nie dadelik bel nie, omdat ek weet as hy, as hy kwaad word, dan gaan hy baie jaag en ek was bang hy maak 'n ongeluk, of weet, ek het dadelik daaraan gedink. Dis hoekom ek hom nie gebel het nie, want ek weet as hy...kap 'n stressie gou, so, want ek was...My sussie het gebel. Ek kon nie bel nie, ek het te veel gehuil. Uhm, toe wil sy vir Brian bel, toe sê ek vir haar: "Nee, wag, dat ons net alles eers kalmeer, dan sal ek hom bel. En dan sal ek vir hom sê: 'Luister hier, kom huis toe, want dit en dit het gebeur'", weet, want, kom ons sê, bel ek hom en ek is histeries, dan is hy histeries. En dan jaag hy soos 'n mal ding huis toe...*

Furthermore, during the interviews it became evident that since the rape, the issue of protection has remained prominent in the couple system. In the weeks following the rape, Brian protected Christelle and their relationship by continuously attempting to reassure her and by persisting in his manoeuvres for closeness, despite her initial withdrawal and their feelings of aggression, irritation and frustration with one another. In turn, Brian experienced great difficulty in dealing with feelings of self-blame and guilt because his perception was that he had not been there to protect his wife and children when the rape occurred. Christelle, being very aware of his struggle in this regard, attempted to protect him from these feelings by continuously highlighting the fact that he was required to go to work that morning. She also protects him by emphasising her belief that had he been home, his trying to protect them might have had more catastrophic, and even tragic consequences.

> *Brian: ...Enige iemand kan enige iets aan my doen, maar, uh, my kinders en my vrou, uh, moet jy uitlos, jy weet. En, uh, dit was die ding wat my die meeste gepla het, is, uh, dat ek nie daar was nie. En, uh, dit toe nou gebeur het.*
>
> *Christelle: En ek dink as, as Brian daar moes gewees het daai oggend as dit gebeur het, dan, dan sou daar groot moleste gewees het. Weet, hy sou baklei het, weet, hulle het 'n mes gehad. Hulle kon hom doodgemaak het. Weet, op die ou einde kon dit 'n baie groter situasie gewees het, as, as wat dit was.*

From the discussion thus far, it is possible to note that in order to more effectively protect one another in the months after the rape, they had to restabilise their system and re-establish the functionality of many of their pre-existing effective patterns, such as their attunement to one another and their patterns of mutual support, care, nurturance and understanding. During the interviews it became apparent that in

the months after the rape, by being attuned to one another, by engaging in open discussion and sharing their feelings and opinions about what happened on the day of the rape, and also about what might have happened, the couple is able to mutually protect one another. This protection lies on various levels. On an individual level their open discussion and concerted efforts to deal with the rape in all likelihood lessen the chance of either of them developing long term symptomatology. Furthermore, through their openness around the topic of rape they are able to address, deal with and counter the potential destabilising, distancing and disconnecting impact of the rape, of feelings of blame, guilt and shame or escalating aggression, on their relationship.

Protectiveness was amplified in other ways in the parental subsystem during and in the weeks and months following the rape. During the rape, Christelle protected Tessa by putting Tessa's head under her arm to keep her quiet, to console her and also to keep her from witnessing the rape. However, the couple could not protect Tessa from seeing and knowing that the assailants had gained access to the couple's house by breaking in via her bedroom window. As a result Tessa continues to be very apprehensive about sleeping in her own room, despite the fact that the couple has relocated to another suburb. The couple furthermore protected their children by allowing Christelle's family members to temporarily take over the responsibilities of tending to the children in the immediate aftermath of the rape. In this regard, Christelle specifically was very aware of the fact that she could not attend to the needs of her seven month old son.

> *Christelle: ...Uhm, so dit was, uhm...vir my...die, die eerste week het ek, het ek baie min met hom te doen gehad omdat hy so baie vereis van, van my af. En ek, ek het net gevoel ek, ek kan dit, ek kan nie nou alles vir hom gee wat soos wat ek moet dit doen nie, soos wat 'n ma dit vir haar kind moet doen nie. So, my ma het, het maar daai week, die eerste week het sy maar na hom omgesien en daai goeters...Die eerste week het ons baie min te doen gehad met die kinders...*

As parents the couple is also very aware that they must now re-create a physically safe and secure environment and atmosphere for their children and especially for Tessa. In this regard, and in keeping with her role as the primary child caregiver, Christelle takes the lead, by pointing out safety measures such as locked doors, closed windows, burglar bars and security gates, reassuring Tessa in a way which is appropriate to her developmental phase. Brian takes on a more secondary role in supporting Christelle's efforts and also by reassuring Tessa that he will protect Christelle. In this way they attend to Tessa's fears and needs as they arise, and work together as a parental unit to create a protective and safe atmosphere and environment. It furthermore also became apparent that they attempt to balance meeting Tessa's needs, in terms of protection, safety, security and re-assurance, with maintaining the

developmental gains she achieved before the rape. In this regard it seems they allowed her to sleep with them for a period of time, but now increasingly manoeuvre for her to return to sleeping in her own bed by providing the necessary reassurance. They also decided to take Tessa for therapy with the same psychologist that Christelle is seeing. From the above it is possible to see that their protection of Tessa required the couple to slip back into their usual cooperative and supportive roles and positions in the parental subsystem, furthermore contributing to the restabilisation of their system.

In the couple subsystem protection also manifested on another more practical level. Following the rape, the couple felt so unsafe that they immediately moved out of the house where the rape and burglaries occurred, and moved in with Christelle's parents. A month later the couple relocated to HB. Both Christelle and Brian indicated that they feel safer and more protected in HB. It furthermore became evident during the interviews that this town holds significant meaning for them as a couple in terms of their history and in terms of new beginnings. In this regard, this was also the place where they began their relationship and where they moved to when deciding to live on their own after Tessa's birth. From the interviews it became apparent that relocating to this suburb is a signifant part of the couple's way of dealing with the rape and its impact and in this regard it may be part of both protective and restabilisation processes in their relationship. On the surface it may appear to be an attempt to re-create the former pre-rape reality; however, on further enquiry the couple seems to be aware that in as much as they are returning to a safe space and making a new beginning for themselves, they are not returning to their former reality, since rape has now become part of their new reality.

> *Christelle: Weet jy, as, as ons rêrig werk daarvan maak om dit wat gebeur het in die verlede te hou, weet, en dit daar te los, en dit nie, weet...kyk opbring gaan dit kom, jy weet. Jy gaan nou en dan daaroor praat en soos wat jy aangaan gaan dit beter raak. Weet, dit gaan, dit gaan nie altyd, dit gaan nie, weet dit gaan nie iets wees waar jy sommer net oor gaan praat nie. Maar as jy daaroor moet praat, sal dit, dit sal nie so hartseer en teer saak wees, weet, op 'n langer termyn nie. Maar, uhm, ek dink ons sal maar, soos die tyd aangaan, sterker word as 'n familie en sterker word weet, as 'n, as 'n verhouding……*

It furthermore seems that at the time of the interviews, the couple protected their relationship, their nuclear family and one another from the impact of the rape by focusing on the gains, by trying to re-establish and return to their usual routines, former patterns and roles insofar as this was possible and functional. In this regard, they fell back on their former effective pattern of dealing with and resolving problems and difficulties, including those related to the rape, as they arise. By not ignoring these difficulties and addressing them, they are able to contain the impact of the rape and thereby also protect their relationship.

Christelle: ...En ek het dit, ek het besef dat, dat...dis asof jy liewer raak vir 'n persoon nadat, jy weet, jy eintlik besef het wat jy kan verloor. Ek meen, ek kon my kinders verloor het daai dag. Ek kon my eie lewe verloor het. Maar ek het nie. Ek het my kinders by my en ek het my man by my. En ek waardeer dit dat hulle nog hier is en dat hulle hulle nie weggevat het van my af nie...Weet, saam as 'n familie het ons dit hier deur dit gemaak.

From the above it seems that although it had not been a prominent system value before the rape, protection became part of their system's restabilisation process because it appears to counter some of the chaos surrounding the rape, as well as the subsequent changes and disruptions in their relational patterns, dynamics and processes.

7.4.5 Network of relationships: a safety net

From the above discussions the profound impact of the rape on the couple's relationship has become clear, in that, in addition to the rape itself, the disruption of their usual patterns, roles and positions also amplified the couple's distress. However, despite the initial chaos and instability in their system Christelle and Brian manage to deal with the rape and also to acknowledge and make the necessary adjustments to these relational changes in a way which now allows them to experience their relationship as safe, supportive, containing and nurturing, as can be seen from the following excerpts.

Christelle: Binne ons verhouding het ons mekaar onder steun (sic). *My man het my baie onder steun* (sic) *sonder hom kon ek nie daar deer* (sic) *kom nie.*

Brian: ...Binne ons verhouding was ons alby (sic) *daar vir mekaar maak nie saak wat gebeur nie.*

In addition to the safety and support contained in the couple's relationship, Christelle and Brian's account of their experience of the rape also highlighted the importance of their larger network of relationships. It seems that they experienced their families and friends as helpful and supportive and indicated that these relationships ultimately contributed to their being able to deal with the rape. However, it is important to keep in mind that the couple's clear, permeable and flexible boundaries and the appropriate openness of their system, established well before the rape, enabled the couple to communicate their distress to their family members and friends, to ask for help and also to receive help and support.

In this regard, it seems that the couple system opened up and allowed the involvement, support and advice, offered especially by Christelle's parents, to enter their system. Her parents provided valuable emotional support in the time immediately after the rape and seemed to take on very specific motherly

and fatherly roles in that they provided guidance, nurturance and advice, but also intervened in protective ways. For example, Christelle's father urged her to go to therapy; he accompanied Brian on his initial search to find the perpetrators to protect him from acting irresponsibly, and furthermore provided valuable feedback to Brian in order to address his feelings of guilt and self-blame for not having been there to protect Christelle at a time when she was not able to provide the said comfort, given the intensity of her trauma. Furthermore, her parents also emphasised the potential destructive impact of the rape, and likewise encouraged the couple to deal with the rape by supporting one another and dealing with it together.

> *Christelle: …Want so dag of twee na dit gebeur het, het, my ma spesifiek, het gesê: "Ja, dit, dit sal nou julle liefde toets om te sien is, is, uhm, julle rêrig so lief vir mekaar dat julle, weet, deur hierdie situasie kan kom". En ek het vir haar gesê, ek, ek persoonlik glo dat ons dit kan, dat ons dit kan deurmaak. En my pa het ook vir hom self gesê, weet, dis nou, dis die tyd wat jy jou vrou moet bystaan. Weet, julle moet mekaar bystaan en jy moet, uhm, jy moet vir haar wys dat jy lief is vir haar, en jy weet, daai dinge.*

In the first week after the rape, the couple was so shocked and confused by the trauma that they initially found it difficult to fulfil their roles and responsibilities as parents. In this respect Christelle and Brian's permeable system boundaries allowed other family members to come into their system and temporarily take over the care of their children. From a systemic point of view, this crossing of their system boundaries and taking over the couple's responsibilities not only addressed the issue of child-care during the crisis, but also gave Christelle and Brian a chance to calm down somewhat, adjust to the initial shock of the rape, conserve energy and begin to deal with the rape. Thus, the larger family system provided support in a way which served not only to address the practicalities of their system, but also to contribute to the maintenance and preservation of the couple system in the immediate aftermath of the rape.

> *Christelle: …Ek was baie hartseer en ek het baie gehuil en baie kwaad geword en baie geskreeu en baie gevloek en al daai dinge, weet. Uhm, so dit was, uhm…vir my…die, die eerste week het ek, het ek baie min met hom te doen gehad omdat hy so baie vereis van, van my af. En ek, ek het net gevoel ek, ek kan dit, ek kan nie nou alles vir hom gee wat soos wat ek moet dit doen nie, soos wat 'n ma dit vir haar kind moet doen nie. So, my ma het, het maar daai week, die eerste week het sy maar na hom omgesien en daai goeters… maar ons het daai week daar by my ma-hulle…Kyk dit was net so 2 of 3 blokke van my ma-hulle se huis af, so ons het daar gebly vir so 'n ruk, ek dink vir so 'n maand en toe 't ons hiernatoe getrek. So, maar, uhm, Tessa was maar meeste van die tyd wat ons daar was, het sy maar saam met die kinders gespeel en*

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goed. Weet, S (Christelle se suster) *het haar maar versorg…Die eerste week het ons baie min te doen gehad met die kinders…*

Their families were also supportive and containing in other ways, namely by sharing in their grief and sadness and also in their joy as the couple managed to begin the journey of healing. It is likely that their families' support and containment also served as experiences of connectedness during a time when the couple experienced difficulty connecting with themselves and with one another through their habitual patterns.

Consequently, from the above it is possible to perceive how the couple's family systems functioned as a safety net in the immediate aftermath of the rape, by providing a context of practical and emotional support, safety, advice, nurturance and care. It furthermore seems that this dynamic extended beyond the immediate aftermath of the rape and beyond becoming involved with their system. In this regard, the larger family system also appropriately withdrew from intensive practical involvement and now offer support from a position that re-affirms the couple's unity and independence.

> *Christelle: Ek persoonlik dink dat, veral my ma-hulle, sien ons as 'n sterk, weet ons is, ons verhouding is baie sterker…En ons het, my pa spesifiek het, het vir ons gesê dat hy is, hy is baie trots op ons omdat ons as, as 'n, weet, as 'n huwelikspaar SAAM die ding deurgekom het en nie die een die ander een weggestoot het, of, weet, so iets nie. So, uhm, ek, ek dink my ma-hulle sien ons as 'n, weet ons is baie sterker as wat ons was om deur hierdie moeilike ding deur te gekom het, saam. Nie een elkeen op sy eie, apart daar deurgekom het nie, maar ons het saam daar deurgekom. Ons het saam daar deur gewerk…*

7. 5 CONCLUSION

In a context abruptly changed by the rape, Christelle and Brian's system was destabilised and temporarily pushed into chaos. This was evident from their individual responses to the rape, as well as the rape's disruptive impact on their system patterns, processes and rules, specifically their communication pattern, conflict resolution strategies, patterns of connectedness and level of relational closeness, flow of system resources such as support, care and nurturance, roles and predominant pattern of interaction. These disruptions fed into and amplified their distress about the rape thereby initially increasing their system's instability in the post-rape context.

From the themes identified for Christelle and Brian it was apparent that in as much as the rape impacted on their system and its processes, patterns and rules, their system and these relational dynamics also impacted on and determined how they went about dealing with the rape and its impact. It

was evident that, in order to gain a more encompassing understanding of their experiences of, as well as of the reciprocal impact between their system and the rape, one firstly needs to consider their functioning as a couple before the rape. From an observer's point of view it appears that, as Christelle and Brian's relationship developed, they co-evolved patterns, rules, processes, and defined positions and roles which were healthy, functional and effective for them. These especially included their communication pattern; pattern of fine attunement to one another; pattern of connectedness and level of relational closeness; equality and a power-sharing approach; clear and agreed upon role definitions, effective allocation of responsibilities to roles and their support and respect for one another's roles; management and balanced allocation of system resources such as support, care and nurturance; and clear and appropriate system boundaries.

In addition, from the interviews, as well as from their individual written reflections, both Christelle and Brian came across as attaching great value to their unit as precious and unique, as being satisfied with their relationship and also seemed to experience their functioning as a couple as effective. This made for a relatively stable couple system not excessively burdened by conflict, dissatisfaction, tension, power struggles or unwelcome intrusions before the rape. In other words, there was no significant or threatening pre-existing instability, disagreement or dysfunction that was amplified or brought to the fore by the rape and which could compound the instability that followed as the rape's impact rippled through their system.

Furthermore, certain pre-rape characteristics of their system and relational dynamics appeared to actually alleviate the disruptiveness of the rape and contain its impact. In this regard, their parallel relationship definition allowed for inherent system and relational flexibility and adaptability which proved invaluable in the post-rape context. Being flexible their system could tolerate a temporary shift from a predominantly parallel interactional pattern to a predominantly complementary one, could tolerate temporary changes in how the couple handled conflict as well as in their respective role functions. In addition, this flexibility also enabled the couple to make and integrate the necessary changes which ultimately transformed some of their system's patterns and rules. In this regard, although the couple was, and still to some extent clearly is, distressed about the impact of the rape on how they relate sexually and the implications of this for their closeness as a couple, they tolerate the distress, while simultaneously making adjustments and transforming their sexual pattern. Also, as previously discussed, although their parallel relationship definition allowed for the alternation of the positions of giving and receiving care and support before the rape, in the weeks after the rape, they had to adjust to a rapid temporary unbalanced flow of these resources, first towards Brian and then towards Christelle. They were then required to transform this pattern in order to accommodate these rapid

fluctuations in the one-up and one-down positions to concurrently meet both Christelle and Brian's needs as they dealt with the rape.

From the thematic discussion it was clear that the abovementioned flexibility, pre-rape functionality and effectiveness of their system and relational dynamics enabled them to make the necessary adjustments and changes and meet the demands posed by the post-rape context, without their system or these processes, patterns and rules becoming completely immobilised or disintegrated. The fact that their system and relational dynamics were not immobilised or did not disintegrate in the chaotic post-rape context, and the fact that some of their patterns, such as their boundary processes, remained intact also meant that some system continuity was maintained amidst the chaos of the rape. In addition, throughout the whole ordeal, this system continuity seemed to be grounded in and strengthened by the couple's sense of themselves as a unit or as a "we" and, as mentioned above, the value and meaning they attached to their unit as precious, unique and mutually satisfying. Essentially a couple's sense of "we-ness", is based on their experiences and shared interpretations unique to their relationship. This unique experiential reality also forms the basis for the patterns, processes and rules they co-construct between them (Fergus & Reid, 2001). However, from a systemic perspective this process is seen as dynamic and circular, as the patterns, processes and rules they evolve between them constantly shape, form and re-form how they perceive, experience and define themselves as a unit.

From their responses to the rape it was evident that Christelle and Brian have a very clear sense of themselves as a unit, or as a "we", which seemed to both transcend the chaos of the post-rape context and provide direction amidst this chaos. In this regard, despite their individual distress, traumatisation and their system's instability and disrupted relational dynamics, they still approached and responded to the trauma as a team, showing a keen awareness of and concern for one another and for the changes in their relationship. Their response and approach to the crisis reflected a shared, unspoken belief and certainty that they and their unit could handle and survive the rape and that they could count on one another's support in the process. This knowledge and certainty included an awareness of what the other person needed and what needed to be done in order to preserve their unit. This, in turn, fed back into their relationship fostering the evolvement of a shared and unified concept between them of the crisis they were facing as a couple, enabling them to more effectively access and mobilise external and internal system resources, and to make the necessary adjustments and changes to their relational rules, patterns and processes, while simultaneously protecting their relationship. From the above it appears that their sense of "we-ness" provided the continuity the couple needed to re-organise and restabilise their system and its dynamics in the chaotic post-rape context.

From the above it is clear that the couple's distress about the changes in their system and in how they related to one another in all likelihood initially contributed to the instability and chaos in the aftermath of the rape. However, when looking back, it is possible to see how their distress and awareness of these changes ultimately served to trigger powerful negative feedback loops to restore and restabilise, and in some respects trigger powerful positive feedback loops to transform, their effective, mutually agreed upon and functioning patterns, processes and rules and return their system to equilibrium. Furthermore, the combination of flexible, functional and healthy relational dynamics with their experience, perspective and sense of themselves as a unit made their relationship and system inherently resilient. This allowed their system to remain functional amidst the chaos, which, in turn, reciprocally impacted on the trauma of the rape, curbing its destabilising impact and enabling their system to restabilise fairly quickly.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the research process will be evaluated and reflected upon. A meta-view of the accounts of the three couples involved in this study is offered and suggests an alternative, in-depth perspective of couples dealing with stranger rape. The strengths and limitations of the study will also be reflected upon and recommendations for future research will be made.

8.2 REFLECTION ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The researcher aimed to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the unique experiences and relationship dynamics of couples dealing with stranger rape in order to address the shortcomings identified in previous studies. In this regard, previous studies tended to be quantitative, linear, often superficial and deficit-focused in nature or tended to obtain a one-sided description of the relationships of the couples by involving either the rape victim or the partner in the research process. The researcher, however, believed that by involving the couple, as a unit, in the research process, a description could be obtained from both sides of the relationship, thereby gaining a balanced and encompassing view of the couple's relationship which could more appropriately illuminate the complexity of what occurs between partners as they deal with stranger rape (Bateson, 1979). Furthermore, by exploring couples' unique lived experiences, stories and meanings regarding stranger rape and by conducting a systemic investigation which places these stories, meanings and experiences within the larger contexts of their relationships with pre-existing, co-constructed and ever-evolving realities, relational and system dynamics, as well as individual and relational stories, the researcher believed that rich information would emerge, consequently increasing what is known about these couples beyond the abovementioned limited, linear and decontextualised understandings.

In-depth interviews were conducted with three couples during which their experiences of stranger rape and their relationships were explored. Each partner was also requested to individually reflect, in writing, about his or her experience. The researcher believes the aims of the study have been accomplished and that the abovementioned shortcomings of previous studies on stranger rape have been addressed since the ensuing couples' accounts are unique and rich with personal meaning and provide new, valuable and in-depth insights into the complexities of their experiences and relationships as the couples dealt with, and continue to deal with, the impact of stranger rape.

In order to capture these complexities, in other words the dynamic, non-linearity and ever-evolving nature of the couple's relationship, the researcher chose the metaphor of a dance for the said relationship. Just as partners in a dance have certain established and well-known dance steps, rules and patterns which they repeatedly perform, a couple also follows certain established relational patterns and rules as well as certain redundant behavioural sequences which they uphold and which regulate and organise their interactions. Also, similar to dance partners who sometimes develop new or more skilled and aesthetic moves, or remain true to what has been most effective for them in the past, partners in a relationship also maintain established patterns and rules, or evolve new and more appropriate ones depending on their unique circumstances. Furthermore, although dance partners determine their dance they, as well as their dancing, are affected by the music they dance to, the surface they dance on, where they dance and the presence or absence of interruptions. Likewise, although a couple creates and therefore determines their relational dance, this dance is also impacted by what happens to and around them as they live. Through the thematic discussions of each couple, the researcher illustrated the established relational dynamics, or dances, of each of the three couples and demonstrated how these dances were influenced by the occurrence of stranger rape. Furthermore, she not only illustrated how these couples continued to dance throughout this ordeal, but also how their established pre-existing dance patterns determined their steps, moves and new patterns that they developed in the post-rape context. Finally, throughout the study, the title, or heading, chosen for each couple's story summarises the researcher's impression of each couple's dance as they dealt with, and continue to deal with the trauma of the stranger rape.

8.3 A META-VIEW OF THE THREE DANCES

Taking a meta-view of the various themes that emerged from the stories of the respective couples shows that involving the couple, as a unit, in the research process and exploring their personal experiences and relationships through a systemic lens, generated an alternative and in-depth perspective of the impact of stranger rape, their experiences and relationships in the aftermath of the trauma. Although the meta-view offered here highlights the common sequences in these couples' relationships, or dances, in the context of stranger rape, it in no way represents generalisations about these couples. Rather, this meta-view represents in-depth information which provides a more encompassing understanding of the impact of stranger rape on the couple's relationships. These common sequences include recursion between the impact of the rape and their relationships, as well as the wholeness and primacy of their relationships and systems as they deal with such trauma.

This study concurs with earlier research that stranger rape has a profound and severe impact on the relationships of couples (Remer & Ferguson, 1995; Van den Berg & Pretorius, 2000). However, contrary to earlier research, the study showed that the impact is not as circumscribed or as much a linear process of cause-and-effect as previously believed. As stated in chapters two and three, the majority of previous research indicated that stranger rape causes various problems, reduced levels of functioning and even dysfunctionality in the relationships of couples, for example, in terms of intimacy, communication and role functions (Earl, 1985; Maltz, 2002; Mills & Turnbull, 2001; Moss et al., 1990). However, it was clear from all three accounts in this study that couples' pre-rape unique relational realities, which included their habitual relational dynamics and meanings, recursively influenced their perceptions of the rape, of one another and of their relationships and also determined whether, and what kind of, problems would emerge in the aftermath of the rape. It was also evident that couples responded to and attempted to deal with the rape in accordance with what was available to them in their realities and in terms of their relational and system dynamics regardless of whether these were ineffective or effective. In other words, the study revealed that rather than linearly causing problems in couples' relationships, rape appeared to function more like a catalyst, amplifying already pre-existing problems, contentious issues and dysfunctionalities as well as pre-existing strengths and functionalities in their relationships.

Closely intertwined with the above finding of recursion between stranger rape and couple relationships, the study also found that what happens between partners in the post-rape context does not occur in a relational vacuum or on a clean relational slate. In other words, the post-rape interactions of the couples cannot be separated, or understood in isolation, from their larger relational contexts and their pre-existing relational dynamics. This was illustrated by the abovementioned finding that couples deal with the rape in accordance with their habitual relational and system patterns, processes, rules and meanings and is furthermore evident from the fact that the distress of all three couples in the aftermath of the rape entailed far more than merely dealing and coping with, and understanding the rape itself. The couples were also greatly distressed by, and struggled to adjust to, and deal with, various actual changes in their relationships and by how they interacted with one another, as well as the mere possibility or expectation of such changes. From their stories, it was clear that the rape, as well as these changes, or the possibility thereof, illuminated and brought to their awareness some of their habitual relational and interactional patterns and rules. This, in turn, brought new information into their systems, or re-emphasised known information regarding the relative efficiency or inefficiency of their functioning, as couples, in previous crisis situations, in everyday life and also in the post-rape context. In this regard, these changes in, and information with regards to, their role patterns, predominant interactional patterns (in other words symmetrical, parallel or complementary), patterns of connectedness-disconnectedness,

the level of relational closeness and distance and even the survival of their relationships appeared to be particularly distressing. These changes (actual or potential), their distress about these, and the information with respect to their relationship functioning, fed into their distress regarding the rape. This often amplified relational chaos or instability both immediately after the rape and in the longer term.

The study furthermore revealed that being aware of the recursive impact between rape and the relationships of the couples, as well as being aware of the wholeness of their relationships, shifts the emphasis from the rape to their relationships. In this regard, the primacy of the relationships of the couples was evident from the fact that although their relationships were influenced by the rape, and although changes resulted from this interaction, those changes were ultimately determined, not by the rape, but by their relationship structures. Therefore, the manner in which the relationships of the couples were influenced, how they experienced and responded to the rape and how their relationships changed in the aftermath, were determined by the unique pre-existing relational realities, relational and system dynamics and meanings they had co-constructed or co-evolved between them.

A detailed picture of how each couple's relationship structure determined their responses and approaches to the rape, and determined changes within their relationships, was evident from the unique themes identified for each couple. However, it is also possible to identify certain common features of the relationships among these three couples, which furthermore brings to light systemic effects possibly at play in couples dealing with stranger rape.

The flexibility and rigidity of couple relationships on various levels and in various respects appeared to be especially pivotal in the post-rape context. It was clear from the study that, in the aftermath of stranger rape, one partner (but often both) was so severely distressed and traumatised that she/he could not effectively perform or fulfill his/her respective routine relational roles and responsibilities, while simultaneously requiring a great deal of support, care and consolation. The study suggests that the manner in which a couple defined, or did not define, their relationship before the rape determined how effectively and appropriately they dealt with relational and system disruptions, instability and chaos, individual distress and the demands of the post-rape context. The findings show that the parallel relationship definition, with its inherent flexibility, makes for more relational adaptability, alternatives, creativity and resilience in the post-rape context. This seems to be because the distinctive alternation between the one-up and one-down positions of the parallel definition allowed partners to move between taking and following the lead, to stand in for and fulfill some of the other's usual responsibilities and role functions during periods of individual incapacitation or limitation, thereby ensuring basic system continuity, mobility and functionality. They could also alternate between giving and receiving support,

care and consolation, thereby allowing them to more effectively regulate and contain emotional expression in the couple system in the post-rape context, which in turn kept relational and system instability within acceptable parameters. Thus, a parallel relationship definition seemed to better contain and limit the rape's impact on individuals as well as on the relational system as a whole.

On the other hand, it was found that a rigid relationship definition is likely to severely limit couples in terms of the adjustments they could make to meet the demands of the post-rape context. As discussed in chapter three, a rigid relationship definition exists where partners remain in their respective one-up or one-down positions and roles, regardless of the fact that changes in the contexts of the couples or in their relationships may require a different configuration. The study showed that in the unusual and extremely stressful post-rape context this rigidity complicated, delayed or even prevented partners from compensating or filling in for one another when either of them was too incapacitated to fulfill his or her usual roles and responsibilities while also preventing them from providing adequate and containing support, care and consolation at critical times. This, in turn, severely limited the couple's and individual's post-rape mobility and ability to take action, allowed emotional expression to escalate unchecked, and also brought about a breakdown in certain basic system functions, thereby threatening the very survival of the couple's relationship. Thus, the findings suggest that a rigid relationship definition is likely to amplify the extent and duration of the impact of the rape on the couple's relationship as well as on individuals.

The study furthermore revealed that an undefined relationship is likely to fare the worst, especially if the struggle for control and position has in itself become rigid and characterised by highly organised and redundant patterns of interaction. It was found that in an undefined relationship, the struggle for control of the relationship definition and for who is in control of the various relational domains and resources, generalises to the post-rape context as well. Consequently, the rape appears to be merely more fodder for the struggle. With the rape-trauma "lost" in this struggle, no or inappropriate adjustments are made while support, care and consolation are absent, incongruent, superficial or inadequate, which, in turn, tends to amplify both individual distress and relational instability, thereby exacerbating the duration and extent of the rape's impact on individuals as well as on the couple's relationship in both the short and long term.

In addition to the above, the flexibility and rigidity of couples' relationship and system rules and patterns also determined how they approached and dealt with the rape. It was evident from the study that rules and patterns in terms of communication, intimacy, problem solving, management of and access to system resources, conflict and crisis management, role functions and system openness and

closedness, were especially pivotal. As indicated in chapter three, the systemic concepts of morphostasis and morphogenesis describe a system's ability or potential to maintain an appropriate balance between rule and pattern rigidity and flexibility, depending on whether the context is changing or stable; the context's requirements; the nature, desirability and extent of system changes required; as well as the congruence of new information and changes with the system's identity.

The findings showed that, in the post-rape context, appropriate closedness, stability and rigidity of the relational rules and patterns of the couples were required in order to protect their systems and relationship identities. Yet, appropriate openness, flexibility and change in terms of these rules and patterns were required to incorporate new information in terms of how to deal with the rape, to accordingly make the necessary adjustments to established rules and patterns and evolve new ones, and to maintain system and relational functionality. However, the above statement should be further qualified. In this regard, it was evident that the appropriateness of a pattern or rule's rigidity (continuity) in the post-rape context is closely intertwined with the efficiency or functionality of that specific pattern or rule in the couple's relationship. It seemed that if a specific rule or pattern had been efficient or functional for a couple before the rape, in other words the rule had contributed to the well-being of the couple unit as a whole and to that of the individual partners, any rigidity or continuity of that pattern or rule in the post-rape context was appropriate. It was also evident that the rigidity, or continuity, of effective and functional rules and patterns contributed to the restabilisation of the couple's relationship in the aftermath of the rape. However, if a specific rule or pattern was ineffective for the couple, in other words, it contributed to relational tension, distress and instability, or the overall dysfunctionality of their relationship, or one of the individual partners in the pre-rape context, such rigidity or continuity of that rule or pattern in the post-rape context was inappropriate and destructive. It was demonstrated that the rigidity of inefficient, outdated or dysfunctional rules and patterns can feed into the post-rape context, consequently amplifying chaos, instability, individual distress and the extent and duration of the rape's impact in both the short and long term.

Furthermore, underscoring the primacy of the relationships of each couple in the post-rape context is the finding that their sense and understanding of themselves as a unit and the relative strength, or absence, of their "we-ness" fed into the post-rape context, thus determining how the couple responded to the threat the rape posed to their relationship. In this regard it was evident that the more value and meaning couples attached to their relationships, the safer they perceived their relationships to be; the more committed they were to their relationships and to one another; the more mutual trust existed between them; while the more they perceived their relationships as being beneficial and mutually satisfying, the more inclined they were to conserve and protect their relationships and one another in

the post-rape context. The findings also suggest that in the face of the severe chaos, instability and distress of the post-rape context, the "we-ness", or conversely their "non we-ness", of the couples often seemed to form the stable core around which positive and negative feedback cycles, manoeuvres and countermanoeuvres, and the renegotiation or maintenance of system rules, patterns, processes and meanings, swirled.

In summary, the study demonstrated that the impact of stranger rape and couples' experiences of and responses to this trauma can only be fully understood if viewed as part of their larger relational contexts. It was evident that the manner in which each couple experienced, responded to, dealt with and continue to deal with the rape is a reflection of the unique relational realities the couple co-constructed. Various patterns, rules, meanings and processes were disrupted or amplified in different ways for each couple. Despite these differences, it was possible to identify certain prominent systemic effects at play in these couples, which previous researchers suggested may underlie some of the perplexing observations and findings made in terms of couples dealing with trauma (Balcom, 1996; Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998; Mills & Turnbull, 2001; Nelson & Wampler, 2000). These so called systemic effects appear to include the way in which partners define their relationships; the relative flexibility, rigidity, efficiency, inefficiency, functionality or dysfunctionality of their relationships in general, as well as of specific relational patterns, processes and rules; the meanings with which they imbue their unit; and the relative strength of their "we-ness". The study seems to suggest that the more appropriately flexible and functional and the higher the level of functioning of a couple's relationship before the rape, the more effectively and appropriately they could deal with and adjust to the rape and the less severe the extent and duration of the rape's impact on their relationships and on the partners as individuals. On the other hand, it seems likely that extreme rigidity, dysfunctionality or low levels of relational functioning may either amplify the extent of the impact in the immediate aftermath, or the duration in the long term, on both the individuals and relationships.

8.4 STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY

The study created a context where the voices of three couples and the complexities of their relationships emerged as they shared their personal stories and experiences of stranger rape. Although rape victims and their partners' experiences of stranger rape, as well as their relationships, have been the topic of research studies in the past, the present study adopted a novel approach to the subject. This entailed involving the couple, as a unit, in the research process, exploring their personal experiences of the rape and their relationships through a systemic lens, and finally placing these experiences in the larger contexts of their relationships with pre-existing realities and dynamics.

By adopting this approach, the study addressed some of the shortcomings identified in previous research studies. Previous explorations of stranger rape and couple relationships were consistently characterised by attempts to perceive and understand relational dynamics through an individual lens and by involving either the rape victim or the partner (Connop & Petrak, 2004; Smith, 2005). By involving the couple as a unit in the research process and requesting the partners to also separately reflect on their individual experiences, the researcher succeeded in obtaining double descriptions of each couple's relationship from which it was possible to generate an encompassing sense of their relationships (Bateson, 1979).

Furthermore, previous studies maintained a linear view of stranger rape as "causing" problems for couples. In particular, when dealing with living beings, things and events, linear thinking begins by dividing them into separate parts, followed by an analysis of those parts (Fourie, 1998). Research in terms of stranger rape has therefore traditionally been characterised by first dividing the trauma into different "parts" and subsequently focusing only on a specific "part", for example, focusing on the victim, or partner, or post-rape adjustment syndromes, post-rape relationship problems or the couple's post-rape interactions (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1985; Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983; Remer & Ferguson, 1995; Van den Berg & Pretorius, 2000). This brought about a situation where the dynamic and complex relationships between these and other "parts" were overlooked. As evident from the earlier discussion, new insight emanating from this study hold that stranger rape and the responses of the couples to the trauma do not occur in a vacuum, but rather form part of an intricate network of relationships, relational and system dynamics and mutual influence between individuals, relationships, systems, events, stories, patterns, realities, meanings and histories. In this regard, the study identified some of the relational and systemic dynamics that may be at play in couple relationships, which may account for some of the poorly understood observations made in previous studies. Furthermore, it was apparent that couples are not at the mercy of stranger rape, but rather that the manner in which their relationship functions determines how they deal with the trauma.

The chosen theoretical framework of family systems theory, with its circular view of causality, its focus on contexts, relational and system dynamics, as well as on the relational situatedness of individuals, events and problems, was congruent with the aims of this study and as such provided the researcher with an appropriate lens through which to explore couples' experiences of stranger rape and their relationships.

Consistent with the epistemological lens of social constructionism, the researcher emphasised the stories of participants, based on their personal lived experiences in the context of stranger rape and the

ways in which they constructed meaning from these experiences. Furthermore, since social constructionism views meaning and knowledge as being socially constructed, the partners in this study interacted with one another and with the researcher in order to create new knowledge and meanings. From this emerged a co-constructed conversational reality between the participants and researcher, to which the participants brought their unique stories, understanding of their experiences and the knowledge they co-created as a couple, and the researcher, her understanding, questions and experiences. The themes, new knowledge, meanings and in-depth understanding which emerged from this co-constructed research reality are artifacts of a specific cultural and relational context at a specific point in time and should therefore not be regarded as static or as the ultimate and definitive accounts of the experiences of the couples and their relationships. As the rape-trauma unfolds further for each couple and continues to mutually interact with their ever-evolving relationships, or as the trauma dissipates, these themes may also change.

Selecting a qualitative research approach for this study allowed the researcher to fully disclose to the participants the aims and the processes she intended to follow. This is clearly different from empirical and positivistic research where the tendency is to disclose very little, if anything, to participants (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Given the extremely sensitive and painful nature of the subject under study, a respectful approach and the establishment of rapport and trust between the researcher and participants were vital in order to create a context in which the participants would feel comfortable enough to disclose their personal experiences and stories. The flexibility of the qualitative interview gave the researcher the freedom to be sensitive, empathic, to make use of reframes and change the direction of questions during the interviews as and when necessary. Furthermore, by nature, stranger rape is an intrusive event that violates the lives of the couples and as such the researcher was very conscious of the fact that a study regarding the trauma might potentially also be intrusive and violating. The collaborative, egalitarian, interactive and parallel process of the qualitative research approach helped to create a respectful research context in which the couples, as experts of their own lives and experiences, became co-researchers from whom the researcher learned (Rapmund, 2005). In this regard, all three couples indicated in the interviews that they valued the opportunity to transform a painful event into something meaningful and of assistance to others, including the researcher, and especially to other couples living through a similar ordeal.

As discussed in chapter four, the traditional, more modernistic, concept of reliability entails that a study is reliable to the extent that its process and findings can be replicated (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). The idea of a replicable, stable, unchangeable external reality is not congruent with the social constructionistic epistemology underlying this study. Rather, the information obtained during the

research process, and the research process itself, are regarded as being co-constructed between the participants and the researcher, and therefore representative of a unique reality. Given the social constructionistic imbeddedness of the study, trustworthiness and dependability are more appropriate alternatives to reliability. These concepts refer to the degree to which the reader can be convinced that the findings occurred as stated by the researcher (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999).

The principles of trustworthiness and dependability, in this study, were achieved through the researcher's disclosure of her orientation and by making explicit, through rich descriptions, the social and cultural contexts of the participants as well as her own. By establishing a relationship of trust, respect and acceptance and by engaging intensively with the participants as well as observing and conceptualising their interactions as couples during the research process, the researcher was able to gain an understanding of their worlds and experiences from their perspectives. Reflecting her understanding of their stories and experiences to them during the interviews provided opportunities for the participants to correct the researcher's observations and interpretations. Furthermore, throughout the process, the researcher also acknowledged her own worldview and remained aware of, and commented on, how her personal frame of reference may have influenced her interpretations of the stories of the couples and their relationships, as well as the interactions within the research context. By continuously referring back to the texts while making interpretations, congruency with the stories and contexts of the couples was ensured.

The traditional definition of validity as describing the extent to which research findings are considered to be "the truth" is, once again, not congruent with the epistemological stance of this study, namely that multiple truths exist. In qualitative research, validity is a function of the researcher's relationship with his/her data or information and is enhanced by his/her ability to punctuate from various perspectives or to acknowledge the existence of various truths (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). Triangulation was one of the ways in which validity was achieved in this study, in other words, information was gained from various sources, using multiple methods and multiple prior theories or interpretations. In this regard, the researcher obtained information from prior research studies, from each participant through individual reflections, from each couple through in-depth interviews, from her meta-observations based on the reading and re-reading of the transcribed interviews and individual reflections, and by engaging in dialogue with the supervisors of this study. Clarifying the congruency of her interpretations of the participants' experiences and relationships with them as well as with the supervisors, as mentioned above, also contributed to ensuring validity. This constantly made the researcher aware of the existence of multiple interpretations and also consistently illuminated the unique realities and truths of the couples. These processes allowed the researcher to honour the constructions and perspectives of her

participants and supervisors, as well as those of previous researchers, and to integrate these into the study.

8.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Bateson stated that the "point of the probe is always in the heart of the explorer…" (cited in Amatea & Sherrard, 1994, p. 2). Similarly, the researcher acknowledges that her approach to the study, her perceptions and interpretations were coloured by her worldview, values, biases and experiences. Furthermore, the stories of the couples were shared in a specific research reality, in other words, in a specific time and place with a specific ecology of ideas that evolved from the interaction between the researcher and the participants. The couples' accounts, the themes identified and the interpretations made in this study were therefore co-constructed between the participants and the researcher and are not absolute truths. Another researcher may co-construct a different research reality, may arrive at very different interpretations and identify alternative themes in the stories of the couples. Although the researcher's interpretations could have been influenced by the lens through which she views the world, she attempted to remain faithful to the participants' worldviews, consequently upholding the reliability and validity of the study.

Based on the above and the fact that only three couples were included, the outcomes of this study cannot be generalised to a larger population. However, the researcher did not intend for the findings to be generalised, but rather aimed to illuminate the uniqueness of each couple's experiences and relationship, thereby providing rich, in-depth descriptions to fill a void identified in the field of rape-trauma research. Moon, Dillon and Sprenkle (1990) stated that this type of research gains validity at the price of generalisability. As already indicated, the information gathered from this study is valid because it reflects and is applicable to the couples' experiences and stories which they shared through the process of participation in this study. It is hoped that the richness of these accounts and the insights that emerged from the study may lead other researchers to undertake further studies aimed at gaining in-depth understandings of couples who deal with stranger rape.

The study is furthermore limited by the homogenous group of participants. As mentioned in chapter four, the researcher did not set out to select couples from a specific ethnic or cultural group. However, the selection process, which was greatly dependent on the availability and willingness of couples to participate, unfolded in such a manner that all three couples were white, Afrikaans-speaking and from single-income households. The implication of this for the findings was that certain system patterns and processes identified in these couples, such as role patterns and the division of system responsibilities, as well as the disruption or destabilisation thereof, may present differently in couples from other ethnic,

cultural or socio-economic backgrounds. As such, particular care should be taken when the findings of this study are used as guidelines for couples from different ethnic, cultural and socio-economic contexts.

Although the study endeavoured to conduct a systemic exploration of stranger rape and the relationships of couples who deal with such a trauma, it might be criticised for being one-sided, as the researcher included only the couples in the research process. As could be seen from the accounts of the couples, various external systems and individuals, and especially their families of origin, played a significant part in the post-rape contexts. In this regard, the couples' families of origin directly or indirectly influenced the manner in which the couples perceived, approached and went about dealing with the rape, while in some cases, the larger family systems were also greatly destabilised by what had happened to the couple. As one participant (Jandre) rightfully remarked, it is not only the couple that is traumatised: it is the entire family system.

Furthermore, systems such as the church, crisis centres, the police services and other professionals, such as psychologists and district surgeons, were not involved in the study. Nonetheless, in accordance with family systems theory and through the use of genograms, the researcher acknowledged the larger family system as well as the couples' larger ecologies of living, and attempted to include these by obtaining the couples' descriptions and perspectives of these systems and participation of these individuals in their contexts of living, particularly in the post-trauma context. However, these descriptions are obviously reflective of the worldviews and experiences of the couples, while very different descriptions, and additional valuable information might have been obtained from these individuals as well as the representatives of these systems had the researcher approached them.

Owing to the subject, nature and the aims of this study, participants were asked to share very personal information, which in itself raised ethical concerns. In qualitative research, no guidelines exist in terms of determining what should be considered public and what private (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). Owing to the fact that this study dealt with a subject that usually remains in the realm of the very private, the researcher was very mindful of how she dealt with the issue. In this regard, because discussions with respect to the rape were likely to raise painful memories, the researcher had to tread the line between researcher and therapist very carefully. The researcher clarified her role in the context and also limited her enquiry and collection of information to the realm of the study and her expertise. She also assured participants that she would, from her side, terminate the research process should she feel that participation was not indicated for the couple or an individual partner and that a referral to a therapist

could be provided at any point in the research process should the couple express such a need or in the event that the researcher became aware that it was indicated.

In addition to the above, the researcher clearly explained the research process and her expectations to the participants and also explored, with the couples, the possible impact of participation in the study so as to enable them to make an informed choice about their voluntary participation in the study. Furthermore, the couples were informed that they could also withdraw from the study at any point in time. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, the welfare and privacy of the participants were of utmost importance to the researcher. In order to protect their privacy and ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used throughout and the names of suburbs, crisis centres and professionals were either changed or omitted.

8.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study brought to the fore the uniqueness and richness of each couple's experience and also the manner in which the unique relational realities they constructed determined the ways in which they dealt with, and continue to deal with, the rape. Although this study begins to fill a void in the field of rape-trauma literature by providing an in-depth perspective and valuable insights into the systemic and relational dynamics possibly at play in couples facing the challenge of stranger rape, the findings suggest that this void looms even larger than previously expected. In this regard, the extent of relational and system distress, instability, disruption and immobilisation in the short and long term aftermath of the rape suggests that more qualitative and systemic studies are urgently required in order to further investigate the preliminary findings of this study.

The significant findings from what was a very homogenous study strongly suggest that studies need to be conducted amongst other ethnic, cultural and socio-economic groups in order to gain in-depth understandings and insight into how systemic and relational dynamics might present and interact differently with a trauma as extreme as stranger rape in such groups. Also, with respect to the couples that participated in this study, the rape victim was the female partner. In recent years, the fact that males may also be victims of rape has been widely acknowledged. Systemic explorations with couples where the male partner is the victim of rape may lead to a very different perspective and further insight and by means of this difference, what is already known in terms of the interaction between relational and system dynamics and stranger rape in the relationships of couples might be enhanced. The findings from studies with different groups could be compared and combined so as to further enhance the understanding of a trauma that has predominantly and traditionally been shrouded in preconceived ideas, myths and stereotypes. In this regard, from the accounts of the couples, it appears that rape is still

very much regarded and dealt with as an individual trauma, primarily impacting on the rape victim. Having findings amongst different groups that consistently confirm the relational situatedness of stranger rape-trauma might finally transform the general understanding of such trauma, and in practice, might improve the assistance and services provided to these couples in the post-rape context.

The couples in this study were not selected based on specific adjustment difficulties or problems they experienced in the aftermath of the rape. Rather, the researcher aimed to gain in-depth insight into a domain that has not been appropriately explored previously. It may be worthwhile to conduct separate studies with couples experiencing significant and profound difficulties and those who have seemingly adjusted and coped well and then to compare these findings. This may provide further insight into specific relational and system dynamics that may be beneficial or detrimental to couples dealing with stranger rape, which in turn might provide valuable information for professionals in terms of intervention strategies. However, when conducting such investigations, researchers should bear in mind that the congruence, relative appropriateness and functionality of relational and system dynamics should be determined from the perspective of the couple's system and not from that of the researcher. Failing to do so will mean imposing external values onto a system, which may themselves represent a threat to an already vulnerable and destabilised system.

As mentioned in the section on limitations, future research should be extended, to also explore the larger ecologies of living with regard to rape-traumatised couples. It was evident from this study that what happens in the couple system is not contained in this system, but through mutual influence and interaction spills over into the larger family system. The couples who had children at the time of the rape indicated that their children were in some way affected by the rape, especially in terms of concerns about the rape victim, caring for her and protecting her. This was regardless of the fact that the occurrence of the rape was not disclosed to them, and despite the fact that they were too young to really understand the concept of rape. Given the degree of short and long term distress, disruption and instability reported by the couples participating in this study, one can expect that the children may also experience significant distress. However, the literature review showed that very little is known about the impact of the mother's rape, and the couple's experience of and response to the rape, on children (Feinauer, 1982; Mio & Foster, 1991).

Another aspect of rape-traumatised couples' ecologies of living that deserves further investigation pertains to the kind of assistance that they would find helpful. Although this study was not designed to investigate the nature of assistance and resources available to couples in the post-rape context, the findings seem to suggest that the more inclusive the assistance provided to the couple, the more they

experience the assistance as helpful. In this regard, Belinda and Jandre indicated that the church's relational and comprehensive approach and acknowledgement of them as a couple were more helpful than the assistance offered by trauma centres which focused only on the crisis at hand and on Belinda. Similarly, Christelle and Brian reported that the fact that the crisis centre she attended also offered therapy to their children and not only to Christelle, was especially helpful. However, these findings need to be further explored and substantiated.

In terms of future research regarding couples' experiences of stranger rape and their relationships, the joint interviews with the couples seemed to provide valuable information, not only in terms of content, but also because these afforded an opportunity for the researcher to observe and gain a feel for the relational and system dynamics of the couples. Even though the interviews only provided a very small sequence in, or snapshot of, what is a much larger, dynamic and evolving dance, they still yielded process information that would not have been available had the researcher approached the partners individually. However, although the written reflections provided valuable information in their own right, the researcher in some cases found them quite limiting and restrictive in terms of bringing the information into the joint interviews and clarifying some of the questions that arose from these reflections. If the researcher were to conduct a similar study, she would prefer to replace the written reflections with individual interviews with each partner in addition to the joint interviews.

In the process of undertaking this study, the researcher gained a great deal, and it is her hope that the dissertation will in turn feed valuable insight back into the community of those who suffer this particular trauma and those who interact with them.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Consent Form

I, …………………………. confirm that

- I have been duly informed regarding the nature of this study as well as my participation in the study;
- that by taking part in this study, I incur no risk or harm to myself and have been informed that my participation in the study is voluntary, and that I can withdraw from the study at any point in time without any negative consequences;
- I hereby consent to participation in an interview conducted with me and my partner;
- this interview will be conducted by Marina Bosman, a Clinical Master's Psychology Student from the University of South Africa;
- I have been informed that participation in this study involves being audiotaped and that these tapes will only be reviewed by the researcher and her supervisors, Mrs. E. Visser and Dr. I. Ferns. I have been informed that the audiotapes will only be used for the purposes of this study.
- I have been informed that the audiotapes will serve only as a back-up to the researcher and that they will be destroyed immediately upon acceptance of the dissertation.
- I have been informed that all personal details, which may reveal my identity, have been changed in order to protect my identity and privacy.
- I have been informed that full transcriptions of the interviews will be made available to examinators, but that it will not be contained in the final dissertation.
- I have been informed that the results of this study will be used for research purposes only and that it will not be published.

…………………………..   ………………………….

Signed   Date

APPENDIX B: Guidelines for written reflections

(For the convenience of the reader, these guidelines have been translated and the English version follows hereafter)

Die volgende vrae is **bloot riglyne** en kan gebruik word in jou refleksie oor die impak van die verkragting op julle verhouding **as** dit van toepassing is vir jou. Ek stel belang in **jou** ervaring, belewenis en opinies en daarom hoef jy glad nie die riglyne te gebruik as jy nie wil nie / nie gemaklik is daarmee nie / as dit nie pas by jou ervarings nie.

- Wat was jou belewenis van die verkragting?
- Wat was jou belewenis van jou eggenoot se belewenis van die verkragting?
- Hoe het jou of jou eggenoot se status in julle verhouding, en buite julle verhouding, verander na afloop van die verkragting?
- Watter rolle en verantwoordelikhede het jy en jou eggenoot in julle verhouding en in die gesin? Watter impak het die verkragting daarop gehad?
- Wat dink jy is jou impak op julle verhouding? Hoe is dit geraak deur die verkragting?
- Voel jy dat jy 'n plek en 'n "voice" het in julle verhouding?
- Wat is jou belewenis van die kommunikasie in julle verhouding? Hoe gereeld gesels julle met mekaar en waaroor gesels julle?
- Hoe sou jy julle verhouding beskryf in terme van nabyheid ("closeness") en afstand ("distance")?
- Wat is die betekenis van die seksuele aspek van julle verhouding vir jou? Het die verkragting enige kort of lang termyn impak daarop gehad?
- Watter ondersteuning was vir jou beskikbaar: binne julle verhouding?

                                                binne julle gesin?

                                                buite die gesin?

The following questions are **merely guidelines** and may be used in your reflection regarding the impact of the rape on your relationship, **if** it is applicable or relevant for you. I am interested in **your** experiences and opinions and therefore you do not have to use these guidelines if you do not want to / if you are not comfortable with them / if they do not fit with your experience.

- What was your experience of the rape?
- What was your experience of your partner's experience of the rape?
- How did your status, or your partner's status, in your relationship, and outside of your relationship changed after the rape?
- Which roles and responsibilities do you and your partner have in your relationship and in your family? How did the rape impact on these?
- What impact do you think you have on your relationship? How was this altered by the rape?
- Do you feel you have a place and a voice in your relationship?
- How do you experience your communication as a couple? How often do you have conversations with one another and what do you speak about?
- How would you describe your relationship in terms of closeness and distance?
- What meaning do you attach to the sexual aspect of your relationship? Did the rape impact on this in the short or in the long term?
- What support was available to you: within your relationship?

                                                       within your family?

                                                       outside of your family?