

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Science in the Soulkitchen of Everyday Life – A Research Paradox

1.

In the 1950s, a Swedish market research institute wants to study the behaviour of bachelors in their kitchens. The aim is to use this information to optimise everyday movements by rearranging kitchen furniture in such a way as to avoid unnecessary walking. In a long phalanx of humpback Volvos with caravans attached, the market researchers set off for remote Norwegian villages where the selected test subjects live. The Norwegian film “Kitchen Stories” (2003) follows the tragicomic fate of this peculiar research project. The approach would probably have been right up Kurt Lewin’s alley: science leaves its laboratory experiments and ventures boldly and curiously into people’s everyday lives.

As viewers, we first experience how difficult it is to even gain entry into the home of a stranger. It appears just as closed and inaccessible as Isak, the test subject himself. When, after several attempts, it finally succeeds, the film surprises us with a comical twist: Folke, the Swedish market researcher, enters the kitchen with a wooden high seat, on which he then sits down without saying a word. From above he has an excellent view over the kitchen and the test subject at work. He immediately begins to trace the test subject’s movements on a sheet of paper, always in silence so as not to compromise the objectivity of the ongoing investigation.

This strict lack of contact, coupled with intimate closeness, irritates Isak and us viewers too. A strange tension builds up because everything in the kitchen should continue as usual, but because of the observer’s presence, nothing is as it usually is. Isak tries to establish some kind of connection with the ‘overseer’ Folke through gestures and glances, but Folke remains firmly abstinent. We now see how Isak comes into the kitchen less and less often and leaves again more and more quickly. Once, he even turns off the light on his way out, leaving Folke alone in the dark on his high seat. The next day, he wears a headlamp so he can better observe his darkened research subject. But Isak hardly ever enters the kitchen anymore.

We experience another surprising twist in the film when Isak sets up new, temporary cooking facilities in a room above the kitchen, completely out of sight

of the researcher. He also drills a hole in the wooden floor through which he can closely observe Folke and his notes. Folke, meanwhile, sorely misses his research subject, but does not realise that he has now become the subject of research himself. He reports his strange findings to his strict boss, saying that his test subject is apparently cooking and eating in a room other than the kitchen. Neither of them understands this behaviour, as they stubbornly ‘overlook’ the connection with their research setting. For them, the test subject is a somewhat eccentric but still independent variable who, if necessary, should be replaced rather than treated differently. We film viewers, on the other hand, understand Isak very well and even take a secret delight in how he defends himself against the strange research conditions and cleverly turns them on their head. But we also feel sorry for the researcher, who has been left alone in his field of work. From his high seat, he has nothing left to observe, nothing left to note down, and can therefore actually pack up and go home: an exploratory figure in a sad and lost position.

So much for the film, which of course does not end there, but has further twists and turns in store. However, the situation described so far makes clear that we are dealing with a fictional, but no less instructive example of methodological problems in Gestalt psychology research. The setting in the film is reminiscent of Lewin’s ‘field theory’, which sought to test itself in the practice of everyday actions: “According to Lewin’s experience, it is always complete actions in which we want to achieve something or shy away from something, in which we want to reach something or seek to avoid something – complete like figures that close themselves” (Fitzek & Salber, 1996, p. 98).

It is precisely such ‘actions’ – and only these – that the Swedish market researchers in the film are interested in when they study the internal movements of everyday kitchen use. The form of these internal movements is supposedly easy to identify by tracing the lines connecting the stove, sink, table, refrigerator and shelves on the kitchen plan, which the test person follows on his way to work. Further information seems unnecessary, as the movements themselves reveal everything: where they begin, where they continue, where they encounter gaps and obstacles, where they have to turn back or cannot go at all, and where they repeatedly pass by. Thus, a geometric movement pattern slowly emerges on the market researcher’s sheet, which is undoubtedly meaningful.

But does it also contain “the most important, essential and vital aspects of the matter,” as Max Wertheimer demands of psychology? In his view, this requires “clarification, deepening, penetration, progress” (Wertheimer, 1985/1925, p. 99), and just that seems to be significantly hindered in the kitchen story developing between Isak and Folke. This is mainly because they do not communicate with each other. For example, the question remains unanswered as to whether the movements of kitchen users are actually always interested in shortest routes or

whether they do not even need some detours, repetitions and places to linger. The question of what a kitchen actually means to people also remains unanswered. Obviously, it is a space of influence in everyday life with great appeal, which, after a difficult start, also brings the Norwegian research object and the Swedish research subject together. But this disparate unity quickly divides again and secretly reverses itself, so that the kitchen and the recording sheets become increasingly empty. The experimental setup collapses, what the Swedish researcher doesn't like. Lewin wouldn't have liked that either.

2.

In the late development of Wilhelm Salbers' psychological morphology, working with fairy tale images became increasingly important. Of the approximately 200

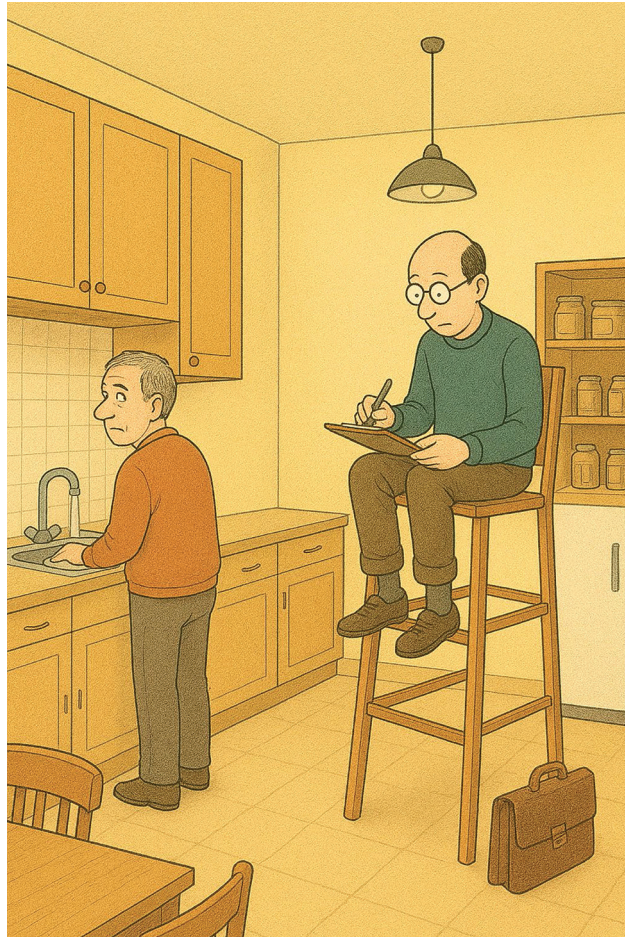


Fig. 1. Figure created with Open AI's ChatGPT image generation, October 2025.

fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, three dozen prototypes of formation and transformation emerged from psychological analysis. The rest can be understood as fragments, variations or even combinations of these basic types. Working with fairy tales takes the principle of the 'transposability' of Gestalt seriously: by exchanging the particular form of cases in psychotherapy, cultural analysis or even market research with the appropriate fairy tale, more and different possibilities of understanding can open up – on both sides. If the transposition is successful, the case and the fairy tale interpret each other.

However, finding the right fairy tale is a task that requires some practice. This is because the structural similarities are not apparent in the details, even if they are very similar, but rather in the overall effect. If an underlying tension can be identified in the analysis, this provides valuable insights into the psychological structure of the whole. *The Sea-Hare* is a little-known fairy tale that belongs to the basic patterns of formation and transformation mentioned above (Salber, 1999, p. 152-154). According to my research, it is the fairy tale that best fits the impact pattern of the film *Kitchen Stories* and can also be easily transferred to methodological problems in Gestalt psychology research. What is this fairy tale about? Here is a brief summary of its circumstances and actions.

A king's daughter lives in a castle, under whose roof there is a hall with 12 windows. They face in all directions and allow an increasingly sharp view. From the twelfth window, she can see everything above and below the earth. Nothing remains hidden from her. She is looking for a husband, but sets him an impossible condition: he must be the one who can hide from her so well that she cannot find him. Ninety-seven men have already tried in vain; their severed heads are stuck on stakes in front of the castle. Then three brothers arrive and accept the challenge. She spots the two older ones from the first window and has them beheaded. The youngest asks for three attempts from the outset and is granted them because he is so handsome and begs so kindly. He goes hunting and encounters three animals, which he spares at their pleas. They repay him by helping him hide, but the princess quickly finds him in a raven's egg and then in the belly of a fish. The fox is cleverer and leads him to a source of transformation, from which they both emerge as a merchant and a sea-hare. At the market, the king's daughter takes a liking to the little animal on offer and buys it. The merchant advises the sea-hare to hide under the princess's braid when she looks out of her windows in search of the young man. She cannot see him from the first eleven windows, and when she cannot see him from the twelfth either, she slams the window shut in fear and anger so hard that all the glass shatters. She feels the sea hare under her braid and angrily throws it out of her castle. The source of transformation then helps him regain his former appearance as a young man. Back with the princess, he does not reveal who helped him, and she does not ask how he did it. She thinks he must be more powerful than she is and marries him.

3.

Analysing the impact of the film *Kitchen Stories* makes quickly clear that the audience's experience is driven by the *basic tension between an accepting co-movement and a rejecting separation*. The film begins with bizarre market research experiments set to cheerful music, which arouses curiosity and builds anticipation for an upbeat development. Significantly, however, this light-hearted introduction is abruptly interrupted by a staged film break. The arrival of the market researchers gets things moving again, but leaden landscapes, melancholic music and the protagonists' sluggish conversations slow things down again. An involuntary 'discovery of slowness' takes place. This pattern continues throughout the film: time and again, you feel that you are finally getting into the development of this strange story and that you are about to discover something special about it. And time and again, you find yourself turning away in irritation because the viewing experience is so torturously strained by dysfunctional relationships and connections. The aftermath of the film is similar: after going through this development, a few viewers become declared lovers of the work, which is perhaps reflected in its Oscar nomination in 2004. Many others come out of the film shaking their heads, disappointed and sometimes even angry – if they manage to make it to the end at all.

Such polarising effects cannot, of course, be separated from what the film deals with in the narrower sense. For here, too, the long journey of the Swedish market researchers to the Norwegian bachelors, their difficult adjustment to driving on the right, and their patient waiting for doors to open reveal a great willingness and effort to go along with things. The counter-tendency towards dismissive distancing is then noticeable in Isak's stubborn reticence and Folke's silent observation from the raised seat. And the same polarity is ultimately evident in the fairy tale of *The Sea-Hare*. The willingness to move forward is expressed in the summoning and inviting of those willing to marry, in granting three attempts to hide, in letting the animals that are targeted for hunting live, and in their grateful helpfulness. The dismissive distancing becomes increasingly apparent in the 12 inspection windows, in the angry throwing out of the sea-hare and, in particular, in the 99 severed heads on stakes in front of the castle.

If we now compare film and fairy tale, a common structure of impact becomes apparent, dealing with the structural problems of seeing between proximity and distance. In the film, it is not only the research subject and the researcher who observe each other, but also other characters such as the family doctor, a friend of Isak's, a colleague and boss Folke's: everyone observes everyone else – and we, the film viewers, observe them in turn. In the fairy tale, too, vision is heightened to such an extent that everything above and below the earth becomes visible. This achieves a kind of super-vision, where extremes meet: the highest visual power

and the greatest failure in seeing are then very close together. To put it bluntly, one could say that the viewers of the film feel just as paradoxically addressed as the suitors of the king's daughter in the fairy tale: the figure they are looking for is the one who cannot be seen. There is actually no solution to this impossible demand. Yet the fairy tale offers a solution, and this brings the transformative aspect of Gestalt into play. The young man can only survive by becoming something completely different. Something that the king's daughter associates so little with him that she even brings it into the castle herself and allows it to come very close to her. She is extremely perceptive when it comes to hidden figures, but she completely overlooks transformed figures.

Transformation is therefore the 'blind spot' of all vision that is fixed on certain forms. It does not take into account the ongoing development of these forms – their metamorphosis – and therefore loses sight of them. The king's daughter initially reacts with fear and anger to her visual impairment, but then comes to terms with it surprisingly quickly. For now, through marriage, the proud uniqueness of her form can finally be transformed, which seems like a kind of redemption. Perhaps the lovers in *Kitchen Stories* undergo a similar transformation, which in the further development of the film even leads them to a peculiar 'happy ending'. Although Isak and Folke grow closer again after their 'relationship crisis' and actually become friends, in the end Isak dies and Folke lives and works on his farm. He is no longer a market researcher, but has transformed himself into his former research subject. The disappointed viewers and those who gave up, on the other hand, seem unable to overcome something the film presents them with, like a mysterious oracle's prophecy. What is it?

4.

The answer to this question could be: it is the paradox of involvement and disengagement that they cannot resolve. This is not meant as a criticism, because they are in good company with many other sciences, including psychology. All of them have long struggled with how objective or subjective, how precise or approximate, how calculating or descriptive they need to be in their research work. Or, to put it more in fairy-tale terms: which phenomena must laboratory experiments, questionnaires or in-depth interviews 'behead' and which can they still 'let live'? What do such studies want to see, what do they want to know, and what can they not see at all, not understand at all? The answer to these questions also depends on the theory applied in each case. Lewin's famous remark that nothing is as practical as a good theory comes across as impressively light-hearted, as if to say: theory and practice – what's the problem? Perhaps this is precisely why the bon mot became so famous. But there are other quotes from Lewin that make the implicit paradox of this statement much more explicit:

“The researcher must be convinced in a very specific, tangible way of the recognisability and rationality of the countless indifferent and shocking, ridiculous and grandiose facts with which he struggles daily in their incomprehensibility and inexhaustibility. He must look at the facts and, again and again, view and study them openly and unencumbered by any theory; and yet, precisely as an experimental researcher, he must know that the mass of so-called facts is only reasonably clear and unambiguous on the surface, but dark and mostly ambiguous in its depth, that, based on a few experimental facts, he must often face an army of everyday ‘facts’ with sovereign disbelief and superior knowledge, which seem to speak a completely different language than his theoretical thesis, and that, ultimately, every step forward remains bound to progress in the sphere of theory, to its development to the utmost conceptual consistency, breadth and depth.” (Lewin, 1926, p. 5)

Here, the paradox of theory and practice, or of distancing oneself and going along with the flow, is taken so far that it almost makes you despair. This courageous description of everyday research reality must surely be devastating for any branch of psychology that demands controlled conditions, precise data and unambiguous results from scientific work. Lewin paints a completely different picture of research, which for many probably comes dangerously close to the ‘devil’s kitchen’ of unscientificity. For other psychological approaches, however, it is precisely this ‘kitchen image’ of research that is a decisive indication that an attempt is being made here to take into account the omnipresent transitional nature of the psyche – with “sovereign disbelief” (ibid.) and yet with method.

But what exactly is this method? For morphological psychology, it is the so-called *co-movement method*: “Without co-movement, nothing effective can be achieved” (Salber & Conrad, 2006, p. 35). In this way, it seeks to distance itself from the immobilising methods and explanatory theories of other psychological approaches. For these, maintaining objectivity is one of the highest scientific virtues, and keeping your objective distance literally helps you to see the forest for the trees, i.e. to recognise its shape. But is that enough? Don’t you also have to walk between the trees with the experience to perhaps get lost in order to get an idea of the forest as a whole?

Kitchen Stories and *The Sea-Hare* are vivid examples of what the method of co-movement means, what problems it leads to and what ‘solutions’ it aims for. The Swedish observer in the film sits in the kitchen of his Norwegian test subject. Getting there required a long and complicated journey, which is where the co-movement begins. He then sits on a high seat so that he can clearly see and trace the movements in the kitchen that he is investigating. To a certain extent, this is still co-movement, because the researcher becomes a kind of seismograph of the actions taking place. At the same time, however, the distancing becomes noticeable here, because the researcher is not in the middle of the kitchen activity, but is

visibly elevated above it in a corner of the room. This gives him a good overview, but his persistent silence and strict avoidance of any other interaction increases the distancing to the point of relationship abstinence while maintaining control and supervision. This is to ensure that the research subject can continue to behave normally and uninfluenced in his everyday reality and thus provide unadulterated data.

This is a well-intentioned attempt at objectivity, but it naturally has a distorting effect in other ways. After all, it can only succeed if those involved pretend that

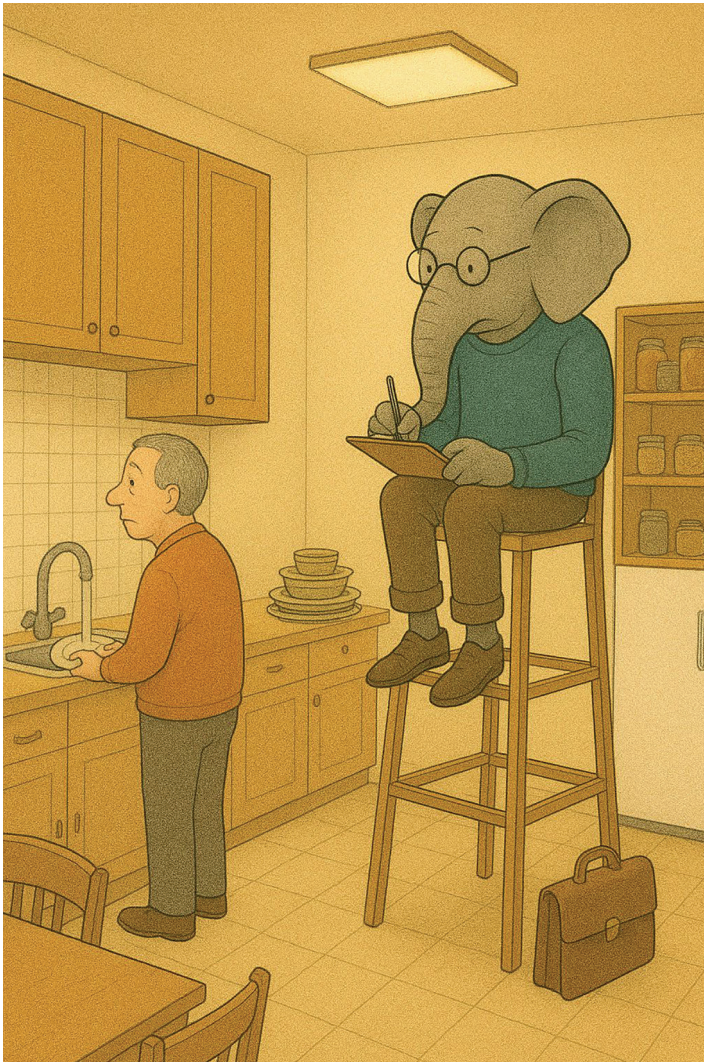


Fig. 2. Figure created with Open AI's ChatGPT image generation, October 2025.

the observer is not there at all. But he is there and constantly has an effect – above all a disruptive one, because he remains a foreign body in the research process. He is the conspicuous yet unapproachable ‘elephant in the room’, which is why the test subject leaves the room very quickly. The emerged impact unit between the research subject and the research object cannot hold together the paradox of co-movement and distancing and breaks down for now. Later in the film, Isak and Folke do indeed become friends, but at the price of gradually abandoning the kitchen research project they had started. This, too, is a division of the impact unit and the paradox, because although there is now a great deal of personal closeness, scientific curiosity and distance are lacking. So it is a failure of a different kind – can it be prevented at all?

5.

To answer this question, a final illustrative example may be helpful. It concerns the Gestalt law of shared destiny, which is depicted in a graphic animation as follows. First, you see a rectangle with many small black spots on a white background. Apart from the rectangle, no shape is visible. But then, some of these spots begin to move together to the right, while the others remain stationary, and suddenly the shape of a walking snow leopard can be seen. It is clearly visible, without any outline, but only as long as the spots move together in one direction. When the movement stops, the snow leopard quickly disappears again. This illustrates something fundamental in a simple way: this shape is only recognisable when it is moving, which is why morphology likes to refer to it as a “Gestalt on journey” (Salber, 1991, p. 3). When the shape is stationary, however, it can hide, just like in a children’s game: by making itself completely congruent with its surroundings, it makes itself disappear.

The Sea-Hare and *Kitchen Stories* are also about hiding and discovering, about movement and stillness. In the fairy tale, it is the suitors who try to hide by remaining still, while the king’s daughter can find them by moving from window to window. In the film, it is the research subject who remains still, while the object of research is allowed to move freely. Under constant observation, he feels too exposed on the one hand and, on the other, clearly suffers from being seen and studied only in a small part of his totality, namely on his kitchen paths. Initially, he can only resolve this dilemma by leaving ‘the field’, thereby making himself untraceable.

The Gestalt law of shared destiny is remarkable in another respect: over time and in the course of the process, a shared story develops a recognisable form. This happens, for example, in therapeutic processes between therapists and patients, and also in in-depth interviews between test subjects and interviewers. This formative development of a process community is referred to in morphology as

a “joint work” (Salber, 1980, p. 101), which once again explicitly emphasises the impact unity of those involved. However, this does not only refer to the people involved, but also to the structural relationships involved, which always extend into polarities.

The challenge now is to bring these opposites together in a unit that moves in one direction, like the snow leopard. If this feat is accomplished, a psychological object is formed that does not have to separate its operation side (method) and its statement side (theory), but can instead hold them together in further “clarification, deepening” and further “penetration, advancement” (Wertheimer, 1985/1925, p. 99). An object formed in this way cannot be a finished, complete form, but must be a form in constant flux. The crucial question is now: Can it withstand its inherent paradox, even if this means that it has to grapple daily with “countless indifferent and shocking, ridiculous and grandiose facts, with their incomprehensibility and inexhaustibility” (Lewin, 1926, p. 5)? Or to put it another way: Can it participate in the kitchen movements of everyday life ‘at eye level’ and at the same time remain quietly observant from above?

Lewin addresses such paradoxical questions with the pronounced practical orientation of his theory. Science cannot limit itself to the mere recording and explanation of its subject matter with genteel restraint, but must involve itself in the events, observe itself, explore itself and also transform itself. In the fairy tale of *The Sea-Hare*, this transformation is not understood in the end, but simply accepted without further questions. Science, however, cannot and must not stop asking questions. Its challenge is to recognise its own limits and to constantly push beyond them. But as long as it knows what it is just doing – and this, in turn, it can learn from its high seat position – it remains a knowledge-creating process, a form of research on journey.

The paradox of the co-movement method can ultimately also be linked to modern physics and contemporary literature. According to Einstein’s theory of relativity and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, it has long been a truism that observers and the observed are not independent of each other – both are mutually dependent. This also applies to psychology, although it still finds it difficult in many areas to acknowledge this strange ‘in that’: research influences its subject by examining it; and by ‘looking back’ at the research with interest, the subject also questions and changes it. On closer inspection, psychological research is therefore always a challenging expedition into a foreign and at the same time familiar land of the soul.

In Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s late work “Der Auftrag oder Vom Beobachten des Beobachters der Beobachter” (1986), a female director is commissioned to reconstruct the mysterious murder of a woman on film. In her search for the truth, she becomes entangled in the criminal events of the case in a ludicrous way.

She too becomes a seeing and overlooking, co-moved and distanced part of an overarching “rotating figure” (Salber, 1978). This shows once again the personal risks that the inseparable community of fate, consisting of the research subject and the research object, must reckon with when they leave their safe laboratories and venture into real life.

Summary

What happens when scientific research leaves the laboratory and – as Kurt Lewin demanded – becomes more involved in people’s everyday lives? With the help of the film *Kitchen Stories* and the Grimm fairy tale *The Sea-Hare*, the article explores this question and highlights the *fundamental tension between accepting involvement and rejecting distance*. This tension characterises the psychological observation and recording of everyday actions, which tends towards a peculiar form of *overlooking*: on the one hand, it wants to see all forms, even the most hidden ones; on the other hand, it overlooks forms, especially those that are changing and transforming. The *ideal of objectivity* demands data that is as unadulterated as possible and therefore requires that everything subjective be kept out of the investigation. Such a separation of the relevant research conditions can be at the expense of the essential and living aspects of the reconstruction. In contrast, a *method of co-moving with the subject* attempts to keep the paradox of proximity and distance in psychological research alive in a *joint work* for as long as possible. This, in turn, can bring it close to unscientific regions. While modern physics has apparently learned to live with this risk, large areas of contemporary psychology do not yet seem ready to do so.

Keywords: Research paradox, co-movement, involving, distancing, overlooking, joint work

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