Attending to the wider field
A butterfly flaps its wings in Tibet and causes a tornado in Texas. This notion from chaos theory is not restricted to the world of meteorology. A small psychological shift can create the equivalent of a tornado of change in the client’s field. Similarly situational change can stimulate enduring psychological change as the client’s world-view is irrevocably altered. An obvious example might be the collapse of something that the client perceives as permanent or certain whether close to home or further afield – a marriage breakdown or a terrorist attack such as 9/11.

Experiential exercise
Think of a time when a more distant event might have altered your view of the world in some way. If you cannot think of such an example consider whether you believe that this is possible for you.

Although the therapy session takes place in a private, confidential setting it is not detached from the wider field. Something we need to be mindful of when working with clients is that they come to their therapy session from a wider situation and usually return to a similar situation. If that situation contains elements of risk, some of the creative adjustments that in the different context of the therapy room we might consider to be unhealthy ‘interruptions’ to contact, in that wider situation may maintain their safety. Behaviour always needs to be viewed in the context of where it manifests.

Parlett, in discussing the unified field, outlines, ‘the web of interconnection between person and situation, self and others, organism and environment, the individual and the communal’ (1997: 16). The relevance of field theory can be difficult to grasp, as this ‘web of interconnection’ can appear to include anything and everything. That butterfly in Tibet might as a consequence of flapping its wings affect things in the immediate field just as historical events will but there are layers of influence in a person’s field. Whilst field
events are connected they are also structured and organized with the figural issue at the centre. When a client comes to therapy many of the background field conditions will be out of awareness.

Let us consider a possible example of the impact of the wider field upon the immediate field. A client arrives for therapy suffering from anxiety. His description of his experience is one of feeling fearful, shattered, fragmented, 'in pieces'. This might be experienced as completely self-contained (within the client's own skin) or in relation to a narrow area of his field, for instance, a work-related problem and fear of redundancy. If we consider this presenting issue as solely the client's problem we journey down the road of anxiety management and an individualized treatment plan (which could be helpful in the short term). However, if we pan outwards from the immediate presentation and consider this experience of feeling shattered, fragmented and 'in pieces' to be a symptom of the person's field rather than of the individual, what might we see from that perspective? We may see a fragmenting industry in which the client has spent his working life, elements of his family past or present may be 'in pieces', and his children's schooling may be fragmenting. Pan out further and he may perceive an uncertain economy, a movement away from the communal and towards an isolated way of being fuelled by technological advances. The client walks around a planet many of whose inhabitants show a lack of care for their environment or are exploitative of its resources, resulting in the physical world coming under threat of its very existence. The sickness is not within the client; it is in the client's situation.

In discussing field theory Smuts saw a possible revolutionary reform in the way we conceptualize, 'for people to accustom themselves to the idea of fields, and to look upon every concrete thing or person or even abstract idea as merely a centre, surrounded by zones or auras or spheres of the same nature as the centre, only more attenuated and shading off into indefiniteness' (1926: 18–19). We may spend most of our time with our clients attending to the more central 'zones, auras or spheres' of the client's field. They are likely to present with a few central themes, but we must not lose sight of the influencing factors in the field that exist beyond the immediate.

According to Lewin (1952) behaviour is a function of the
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current field conditions and the person and the environment are co-dependent with change in either affecting the whole. Any search for understanding begins with appreciation of the whole and follows with examining the component parts, not vice versa. It is worth repeating that the whole is more than the sum of the component parts. Discoveries in quantum physics revealing that nothing is fixed and that there are only constantly moving, inter-related fields of energy dancing their patterns throughout creation support the notion of a field-theoretical world.