Chapter 10
Constructing the Moral Order of a Relationship in Couples Therapy

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Couples therapy is commonly seen as one modality of psychotherapy. Within that framework, the objects of treatment are understood to belong to the domain of psychology, however, it may be defined (Crowe, 1996). From a psychodynamic point of view, the objects of treatment involve the inner worlds of the partners and their mutual inter-dependencies. Cognitive–behavioral approaches seek to alleviate limitations in communication skills between spouses. Systemic therapies address dysfunctional patterns of interaction in the relationship. Through the perspective of attachment theory, emotionally focused marital therapy (Johnson, 2004) seeks to help clients explore and better manage their emotional experiences.

From the social constructionist (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994) and postpsychological (McLeod, 1997) points of view adopted in this study, merely psychological formulations of the goals and practices of couples therapy appear to be restricted in the sense that they do not take into account the institutionally framed constructive work of the spouses (Kurri & Wahlström, 2003). This is not to say that the psychological perspective would not be relevant. However, if the couples therapist's self-understanding of his or her professional activities is solely based on psychological theory, he or she will be naïve in respect to other salient aspects of the process. These have to do with how, in therapeutic conversations, the couple's relationship is presented and performed as a social institution with a particular social and moral order.

In this case study, it will be asked how the discursive practices of the participants in a couples therapy process establish the sessions as an arena for constructing the moral order of the relationship of the partners. The aim is to show, through a detailed discursive analysis of four illustrative episodes in the process, how positionings and meaning-constructions relevant to forming a moral order are performed and how the essential moral dilemmas of this particulate case can be formulated.

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The study is based on four sessions of therapy with two relatively young adults, Victoria and Alfonso, from two different cultural environments (northern and southern Europe) and in an early phase of their relationship.

Theoretical Introduction

As Humberto Maturana (1988) has put it, people enter couple relationships driven by "a passion for living together in close proximity" (Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1990, 158). This view of humans as biologically tuned towards relationships has been endorsed by contemporary affective neuroscience (Panksepp, 2009). The word "love" is commonly used to denote this fitting together, remaining together, and continuous remaking of interactional patterns, in which people as biological (and psychological) systems become involved with one another. Love takes place without prior justification and there is no "reason" for it. In this sense, love as a passion is blind. It does not inform people about how to do "the living together." Still, as Kenny (1985) remarks, love as a primary constitutive condition is also fundamental for social phenomena. This brings us to the question of the social and moral order of the couple's relationship and the intricate relationship between emotions on one hand and actions based on moral judgments on the other—a territory often left unexplored by theorists and practitioners of couples therapy.

A Joint Form of Life and the Moral Order

After entering a relationship, couples have to construct a joint form of life (Kurri & Wahlström, 2003), which means establishing their relationship as one particular instance of a social institution. This process involves applying, within mundane activities, such social practices as mutual positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990) of self and other, and negotiating criteria for diverse category memberships (Widdicombe, 1998), particularly those of being a "wife," a "husband," a "spouse," or a "partner." In (post)modern society, few opportunities remain for one to rely on traditional practices and rituals when doing such constructive work. Consequently, "negotiations" play an increasingly central part in this process, which includes as an essential element creating the social and moral order (Harré, 1983) of the relationship. The moral order of a relationship includes more or less articulated and shared understandings of what is valued and what is not; the loyalties, duties, and responsibilities expected from the partners and the grounds for evaluating actions. It also includes expectations of how value, concern, and respect are communicated.

Couples therapy can be seen as a special, and in some sense privileged, arena for such kinds of "negotiations," a perspective mostly overlooked in theory and research. So-called "negotiating" is done indirectly and it involves discursive practices that

fulfil manifold communicative tasks, such as problem formulations, clienthood construction, blame and counter-blame, complimenting and giving credit, arguing and reconciling, and others. All these discursive practices unfold in therapeutic conversations without the participants' conscious intention to formulate or negotiate any moral or ethical principles. Therefore, the constructive work in this realm is implicit and usually remains "invisible" (Kurri, 2005) for the participants themselves. Accordingly, it has to be recognized within the flow of conversation through interpretational efforts.

There are two good reasons for researching how a moral order is constructed in couples therapy talk. First, even though the conversational acts that establish a moral order can be observed in the interaction, explicating their function as constituents of that order calls for a theoretically grounded analytic reading. Secondly, the concept of a moral order is closely connected to two other important theoretical concepts, namely agency and positioning. These concepts are also of utmost practical importance for any therapeutic enterprise. Establishing new and more agentic positionings for clients in respect to self, others and problems can be seen as the core process in psychotherapy (Avdi, 2012; Leiman, 2012; Wahlström, 1990, 2006a, 2006b).

Positioning

Social encounters are not just meetings between individuals, but between people undertaking particular social commitments. In the social sciences, this has been framed by the concept of role (Suoninen & Wahlström, 2009). When performing a role, an individual conforms to others' expectations regarding his or her behavior in a certain situation. For instance, compared to a client's role, a therapist's role involves different expectations of what the situation requires from the individual. However, actual interaction is hardly ever merely a ritual of performing role expectations and role-based descriptions of institutional interaction consequently miss much of the richness of situational performance. Within the same basic role staging, participants create a variety of interactional settings.

The concept of position (Avdi, 2012; Davies & Harré, 1990), which suggests a more flexible notion of social staging than the concept of role, seeks to account for this situational variability. A position is always interactional, taken in respect to something or somebody else and thus suggests positions for others, hence the action-term 'positioning'. When different positionings emerge in an institutional meeting, the evolving conversational setting affects what the situation can afford (Suoninen & Wahlström, 2009). With changing positions, speakers will vary the accounts they give of events and the descriptions they share of the characteristics, rights, and duties attributable to those involved. Positions appear in different combinations (i.e., including positioning of both self and others) and they are essential constitutive elements of the emerging social and moral order.

Problem Formulations and Clienthood Negotiations

Problem formulations in therapy are not neutral (Buttny, 1996; Buttny & Jensen, 1995; Kurri & Wahlström, 2005). Usually a problem formulation takes the form of a description of an undesirable state of affairs and thus invites a process of change. But there is more to it than just that. Deliberations on the question "what is the problem?" will eventually turn towards the questions "who is responsible for solving it?" and "who is the one who should change?," thereby necessarily committing the speakers to one or another moral understanding. Giving an account of problems includes placing or taking responsibility and consequently it constitutes an act of executing moral judgement.

This is closely connected to the question "who is the client?." It is not uncommon in couples therapy for the position of client to be assigned by spouses to each other and the therapist is called upon to work on the problems of one on behalf of the other (Kurri & Wahlström, 2003). Because of this, "negotiations" concerning clienthood are at the core of the therapeutic process. To whom and how the position of "client" is assigned fundamentally influences how the manifold issues in the couple's life will be dealt with in the sessions. Problem formulations and negotiations of clienthood not only take place at the beginning of the therapy, but are also, albeit often only implicitly, present throughout the entire process.

Blame and Accountability

Problem formulations in couples therapy are frequently expressed in the form of blame (Buttny, 1990, 2004; Kurri & Wahlström, 2003, 2005). Blaming is a formulation of an unwanted state of affairs in which the responsibility of causing, and potentially also repairing, the situation is usually put on somebody else than the speaker. In instances of self-blame, the responsibility is given to the speaker him or herself. While blame constructions in therapy discussion can be explicit and direct, they are often complicated and implicit, including indirect linguistic formulations and nonverbal and paralinguistic clues. The blame can take the form of a seemingly neutral description of a situation or a person, and its discursive status as a blame is seldom unequivocal.

Being a target of blame puts the blamed person in a morally vulnerable position that threatens his or her social "face" (Goffman, 1971). This calls for remedial work on his or her part, by means of which the meaning of a presumably unacceptable or offensive act is improved to the point that it is acceptable. To defend his or her moral status in the conversation, the targeted person may respond by counter-blame. More often, however, the person being blamed finds him or herself compelled to give an account of his or her behavior. Scott and Lyman (1968) define an account as a linguistic device that is employed whenever someone's action is subjected to evaluative inquiry and they specify two different types of accounts: excuses and justifications.

In justifications, the speaker accepts responsibility for an act, but denies its negative quality. Excuses are accounts in which the speaker admits the reprehensible character of an act, but denies full responsibility for it.

Blame constructions in couples therapy are sensitive and delicate discursive moves (Kurri & Wahlström, 2003, 2005). Because the person who blames is also in a position needing accountability, he or she has to create and justify his or her moral status as a person who is entitled to assign blame. This is often seen as softened expressions and circumstantial formulations in blaming utterances. Taking a blaming position in a couple relationship potentially makes the speaker morally vulnerable, since blame can easily reflect back on him or her: why did the speaker choose to form a relationship with such a reprehensible person? Blame and counter-blame sequences are informative from a therapeutic point of view, as they concern the relational patterns of the couple.

Agency

Positions within social interaction—taken or given—can be more or less agentic. Core features of human agency include intentional causality and conscious understanding thereof, as well as the capacity to distinguish between self-caused and externally caused phenomena (Kögler, 2012). Agency requires a reflexive relation towards oneself enabled by an external viewpoint (i.e., a position in which a person takes the perspective of others to reflect on him or herself) (Gillespie, 2012). From a social constructionist perspective, taking an agentic position corresponds to participating in conversations that produce meaning for the person's life (Drewery, 2005). Depending on the conversation, some positions are more agentic (i.e., constructing for the person an active and responsible stance), while others are more nonagentic (i.e., reducing the person's possibilities to influence his or her situations and actions).

Earlier research on psychotherapy talk has shown that disclaiming one's own agency is, in fact, a relatively common discursive practice adopted by clients (Kurri & Wahlström, 2001, 2005, 2007; Partanen & Wahlström, 2003; Partanen, Wahlström, & Holma, 2006; Seilonen, Wahlström, & Aaltonen, 2012). Detailed case studies of therapy discussions have revealed a variety of discursive means used by clients to achieve the conversational goal of actively presenting oneself as nonagentic in relation to the events in one's life. This is in itself an agentic act, however, which results in the simultaneous use of different displays of agency or "split agency," in which the self can be presented as an active and responsible participant in the actual therapeutic situation and, at the same time, as a weak or "acratic" agent in life events. Such multiple presentations of self as agent serve different functions connected to establishing and sustaining a viable moral order within the session (i.e., managing the distribution of rights and duties, accountability and responsibilities, as well as preserving the moral face of participants).

Data and Analysis

The data of this study is comprised of talk produced by two clients and two therapists in their conversations during four couples therapy sessions. This data was made available for the researcher in the form of video recordings and transcriptions of these recordings. The transcripts are verbatim with some special notations indicating prosodic and interactional features of the talk.

Methodological Approach of Analysis

This research on the conversational construction of a moral order includes two methodological points of view. The first one is the construction of positions and participation frameworks within relevant speech actions (Goffman, 1981) (i.e., the formal side of the interaction), and it is guided by ideas generated from conversation analysis (CA) (Peräkylä, Antaki, Vehviläinen, & Leudar, 2008). The second one is the construction of meaning within the relevant passages. This means looking at the content of language use and the meaning-worlds that are constructed in the conversation. These are questions typically addressed by different approaches within discourse analysis (DA) (Potter, 2004; Wetherell, 2001), discursive psychology (DP) (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Harré & Stearns, 1995; Potter, 2003), and social constructionism (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994).

The key concept of analysis is that of the moral order, which is seen as being constantly constructed in conversational interaction. The moral order as such cannot be observed. However, the construction of the moral order can be observed as conversational acts performed by the participants. As mentioned in the introduction, such acts include blaming, complimenting, judging, prescribing actions, defining rights, duties and loyalties, and so on. In actuality, it is any act which contributes to how value is defined and distributed in the conversation. Hence, these kinds of speech acts were the primary units of analysis.

Analytic Procedure

The aim of the analysis was to reconstruct how in their constructive work the participants offered suggestions for the moral order of the clients' relationship. This meant trying to find answers to three questions: (1) *What* contents relevant to the construction of the moral order of the relationship were present in the data? (2) *How* did the participants perform the construction of the moral order of the relationship in their utterances and speech acts? (3) *Why* was the moral order of the relationship constructed as it was?

To answer the first question ("*What* contents relevant to the construction of the moral order of the relationship were present in the data?"), a thematic analysis of the data was done. First, the sessions were partitioned into segments on the basis of the main conversational agendas pursued by the participants. The segments were given headings reflecting the researcher's understanding of the agenda at hand. The identification of segments and the assignment of headings were the only interpretational aspects of the thematic analysis. The contents listed under the headings were merely condensed presentations of the primary data and they helped to navigate within the data corpus.

Then, secondly, based on several readings of the transcribed text and repeated watching of the video recordings, the key meaning-constructions and positionings performed by the speakers were indicated and listed for each topical segment. Notes were made as to the agentic status of the positions taken by the speakers. Analytic ideas derived from positioning theory (Harré & Van Lagenhove, 1999) and from participation theory (Goodwin, 2007), as well as from earlier research, were used here.

To answer the second question ("*How* did the participants perform the construction of the moral order of the relationship in their utterances and speech acts?"), four episodes from different phases of the therapeutic process were chosen for a detailed, turn-by-turn discursive analysis. The selection of these episodes was based on the global thematic reading of the data, and they were judged to be representative of the discursive practices in use and the development of positionings within the emerging moral order, as it was observed throughout the therapy. Analytic principles and conceptual tools from CA, DA, DP, and social constructionism (see above) were used in this reading with the aim of giving a detailed description of how positionings and meaning-constructions were performed. The findings of this analysis constitute the core of the Results part of this study. Extracts from the primary data are also shown, giving the reader the possibility to evaluate the credibility of the analysis.

The answer to the third question ("*Why* was the moral order of the relationship constructed as it was?") can be found in the Discussion part of this study. It is presented as a summary and more general conclusion of the findings, and as such it constitutes the researcher's statement, open to further debate by readers.

Results

The results of the study will be presented as detailed analyses of four exchanges of conversational turns, each of them from different sessions. The first exchange from the first session shows some aspects of the initial problem formulation. The extract from the second session shows one of many episodes in which Alfonso's relationship to his family of origin and the misgivings that Victoria had in respect to this were discussed. The third extract from the third session is part of a longer segment in which the participants returned to the initial problem formulation by exploring in

detail a recurrent problematic pattern in the couple's relationship. The extract from the final session concerns a conversation on an issue in connection to their present life situation (i.e., moving to a new apartment). Each extract is analyzed keeping in mind the research question on how the moral order of the relationship and the agencies of the spouses are constructed in the conversation.

Formulating the Problem

At the very beginning of the first session, in response to the therapist's question "So where would you start?," Victoria referred to her depression: "The reason why we are here is that this, my thing, left scars in our relationship." The first extract shows how the situation was discussed a few minutes later.

Extract 1

Session 1, turns 24–29

24 V	yes, I needed only some tiny reason and I made it grow and grow (.) and I didn't trust him in anything, I didn't trust myself and I didn't trust him, it was like I made everything grow in such a huge problem in my head (.) now I don't do it any more (.) but I really, like, I still need to talk a lot about everything, like if there is anything, I just need to solve it right there but I feel like now Alfonso is not able anymore because he's afraid
25 A	yeah, like kind of, that I just can't
26 T	kind of
27 A	I kind of feel like I can't deal, like I, I before, I felt like I had all this, somehow, patience to listen and, even if it was like for a long, for a long time, this kind of situation now I kind of feel that it's, for whatever small thing that I feel that I get like
28 V	you get in panic, somehow, very anxious like somehow
29 A	yes, it's like, yes (.) I think it's kind of I get afraid that it could be again some similar situation

In the first part of the 24th turn of the conversation (the first turn of this extract), Victoria describes a situation in which she was depressed. Here she exhibits a typical instance of "split" agency. On one hand, she takes responsibility for her action ("yes, I needed only some tiny reason," "I didn't trust"). On the other, she describes herself as nonagentic in the situation. Her past behavior becomes justified as a manifestation of her psychological condition at that time. When she now—in the present conversational context—exhibits a reflexive stance in respect to her previous behavior, she establishes for herself a position as a trustworthy conversationalist.

Secondly, Victoria makes a distinction between her past and present ways of acting ("now I don't do it any more (.) but I really … still need to talk a lot about everything"). These formulations create a position from which she can defend her moral status in the present conversation. The change in self-categorization from a depressed person to a person who is past depression gives different grounds to her claims. The justification for her plea is still psychological, though. It is her "need"

to talk, not her "wish" or her "demand." For the partner, to refuse a need is a morally questionable act, which is quite different from refusing a wish or even more so a demand. A "need" implies some restriction of agency on the part of the speaker, and hence the potential responsibility of a partner to accommodate that "need."

From this position, Victoria assigns blame that precisely addresses a failure to accommodate her need ("but I feel like now Alfonso is not able anymore"). She softens the blame by providing an excuse for Alfonso's undesirable behavior ("because he's afraid"). By doing this, she creates for herself a still stronger agentic position in the conversation as the person who gives meaning, not only to her own but also her partner's behavior. At the same time, the nonagentic position in respect to the problem becomes shared. Both partners are put in a position of not being able to act as they presumably would want to: Victoria because of her "need," Alfonso because of being "afraid." In this way, an instance of "trouble-talk" is performed, which creates an appropriate starting point for a therapeutic conversation, as well as a suggestion for how it should be focused.

There is immediate uptake on Alfonso's part. He partially accepts the blame ("yeah, like kind of, that I just can't"), but proceeds to qualify this acceptance. By stating "I kind of feel like I can't deal, like I (did) before," he justifies his position. Earlier he had been acting as Victoria wished ("I had all this … patience to … listen"), but now he is not capable of doing that anymore. Victoria and Alfonso together construct a justification for this ("you get in panic" and "yes … I get afraid"), and thus this initial problem formulation creates a conversational situation where both partners are positioned as powerless victims of psychological forces (her "need," his "panic"). But at the same time a potential moral dilemma is presented: is Alfonso obligated on the basis of some moral grounds to overcome his "fear" and respond to Victoria's "need"? Is Victoria likewise obligated to take into account Alfonso's "fear" and disallow her "need"?

Weighing Loyalties

In the second session, after having explored the couple's present situation and the consequences of a task that was given to the clients in the first session, the therapist asked "What would you like to do this time here? How would you like to use this time?" Alfonso responded by saying that he is going to visit his home country and his family, and that "it will be like, good to see how that turns out." It has been discussed how Victoria feels that Alfonso forgets her when he is visiting his home country. Victoria has said about Alfonso "that he doesn't think about me, that he kind of likes to forget about me, when he is there." She has wished that he would send her SMS messages during his stays abroad, but has also stated that "it should come a bit naturally." The second extract shows a piece of the discussion on this theme.

Extract 2

Session 2, turns 241–248

241 A	yes, so I think it's not the same situation, we are in two different places, we are apart, she's thinking about, still I think I'm in a different context
242 T	it seems a bit, it seems to have, it seems to have become a big issue this and a very concrete detail in your relationship
243 V	yeah (.) and, yeah it is a big thing because, I know that family is important, and I also (.) I have tried also to I don't want Alfonso to be between two families
244 T	mm
245 V	I think I have tried, but then I feel do they want to keep you so busy so that (.) you don't have time for me, because it's clear that they don't like me
245 A	I think it's
246 V	it's a difficult situation, and I don't know if, Alfonso says that I am important and I really don't want to put him in this a situation, but I am not sure that his family doesn't want to put him in that situation
247 T	which kind of situation?
248 V	that he has to be between two fires

In turn 241, Alfonso defends his position by accentuating the difference between his and Victoria's situations ("I think it's not the same situation" and "I'm in a different context"). Here he is indirectly pleading for his right to be considered in light of his circumstances (i.e., for Victoria to back off from her request, taking his situation into account). This plea is accentuated in his rhetoric when he acknowledges Victoria's stance ("we are apart, she's thinking").

The therapist designates the topic as important ("it seems to have become a big issue and very concrete") and thus worthy of being dealt with in the conversation and then makes an important categorization by defining Victoria's and Alfonso's situation as a "relationship." In her response to this, Victoria makes significant constructive work. She voices a general principle ("I know that family is important"). In doing so, she shows herself as being capable of taking other points of view, including that of Alfonso, into consideration. Therefore, her claim cannot be dismissed on grounds of a lack of concern for Alfonso. Secondly, she redefines the "relationship," giving it a higher institutional status ("I don't want Alfonso to be between two families"). By using the word "family" to define her and Alfonso's relationship, Victoria justifies her institutional rights as equal to those of his family members.

This also works as a ground for putting the blame for creating the conflict between the two "families" on Alfonso's family ("I think I have tried, but then I feel do they want to keep you so busy so that you don't have time for me"). The position of Alfonso's family is constructed as unambiguous ("because it's clear that they don't like me"), which serves to reduce either her or Alfonso's responsibility for the conflict. In Victoria's formulation, however, some uncertainty still remains regarding Alfonso's stance ("I don't know if Alfonso says that I am important"). This expression appears to call for some accountability on his part. In Victoria's version, Alfonso "has to be between two fires," a vivid metaphor for a loyalty conflict, but she evades her responsibility of being one of the actors who has put him there.

The dilemma of the moral order of the relationship created here can be formulated as follows: Is Victoria justified in her demands that Alfonso demonstrate her presence in his mind when visiting his family of origin? Is Alfonso justified in his demands that Victoria consider his sensitive situation when visiting his family and give up some of her requests?

Exploring a Core Conflict Pattern

In the third session, when the therapist asked "what would you like to do today, to use this time?," Victoria responded by saying: "I think that, that things are fine now only the same thing that, why I contacted you in the first place is that he gets, so scared…." She then related one incident when she had asked if she could come and listen to a musical event where Alfonso was playing. He said yes, but a few days later Victoria had asked "do you even want me to come?". She justified this question in the session by saying "because I was the one who invited myself, really not with any deeper meaning, just a simple question, I didn't mean anything with it, I just asked if he wants me to come." This led to a fight between the couple. This incident, and especially Alfonso's reaction to Victoria's question, was discussed at length in the session. Extract 3 is an exchange of turns in that discussion.

Extract 3

Session 3, turns 141–149

141	A	Maybe after that we, after these things turned like this, after that I started having this kind of reaction I think, I think maybe not, maybe at some level, maybe sometimes, sometimes a bit more, sometimes a bit higher, sometimes lower level, but I always have this
142	T	Mmm(.) And how would you define the questions that make this happen? I suppose that there are many questions to each other during the day that
143	A	I think it's some questions about, they are this kind of questions like (.) kind of (.) how to say? (.) maybe when I have to (.) explain something like (.) or prove (.) prove (.) something to her like that
144	V	like usually it's really some simple question that I would need like one word for an answer, but then I don't get it, I get only this awful, like (.) this very bad reaction
145	T2	What kind of a reaction those are? What do you mean by that?
147	V	Alfonso's reaction is like, his face gets like this and like, I don't know, I think I have explained it but I don't know if you were here (.) but he gets like really suffering (..)
148	A	yeah, it's a bit like, when you are kind of disappointed, you are a bit down, a bit
149	V	and then for very small reasons I think this happen like, like I think that in every relationship there is times that you, you want to talk about your relationship, it doesn't work like if you never talk about it, and even if I try to talk about positive things (.) for example once I remember I asked you something that was, I meant it to be a positive thing, but you immediately thought that I had some intentions so like that I have a deeper hidden meaning that I want to get you in a trap, and then it happened again, like he doesn't trust me, he thinks that I always just try to (.) I don't know, I don't know how to explain it but I just feel like I can't talk about things and I don't have the right to feel sad any more or disappointed or anything, that if I need to talk about something like commonly, normally, positive or negative things I feel like we are not able, anymore, and it's very frustrating and we really need to get past this

In turn 141, Alfonso seeks to find a way of expressing his difficulties of responding to Victoria's questions. The use of mitigating formulations ("sometimes maybe," "this kind of," "a bit more," "a bit higher") and excessive repetition indicates that he is approaching the topic as a delicate and sensitive one. He refers rather vaguely to "this kind of reaction" "I started having,", offering his behavior as the topic that should be focused on. In his turn, the therapist prompts Alfonso to define "the question" more precisely, which directs the focus towards the interactional pattern as a whole, as well as Victoria's part in it. Still in a very sensitive mode, Alfonso points to the difficulties he experiences when confronted with her questions. He does not explicate what it is in Victoria's behavior that he finds difficult to cope with, but it appears that this might be his sense of her mistrust.

Although Alfonso does not explicitly blame Victoria, her response takes the form of counter-blame. As is typical of a blame construction, she refers to the undesirable behavior as being recurrent ("usually") and undue as a reaction to her request, as well as to what it would entail ("it's really some simple question"). Again she justifies her request as stemming from her "need", which serves to make it difficult to refute without compromising the speaker's own moral status. Finally, the blame construction is given force by the use of a strong formulation ("this awful … this very bad reaction"). Victoria's turn serves to direct the topic of the conversation to Alfonso's behavior (T2: "What kind of a reaction those are? What do you mean by that?").

In turn 149, Victoria gives an account of the couple's situation that is cast in the form of a complaint or blame. First, she marks what she is going to say as important by giving it a generic reference ("in every relationship" and "it doesn't work … if you never talk about your relationship"). Then the rhetoric of the turn is strengthened by giving an example ("for example, once I remember"). This example works as an exception that reinforces the rule ("I meant it to be a positive thing"), and it presents the rule that patterns the relationship as undeniable. In Victoria's account, the pattern is that because of Alfonso's misreading of her intentions ("that I want to get you in a trap"), there is no longer any room to talk about things (i.e., negotiate the relationship).

From the point of view of the moral ordering of the relationship, it is significant that in her complaint Victoria refers to the couple's predicament as a loss of her rights ("I don't have the right to feel sad anymore or disappointed or anything"). This can be seen as a consequence of the earlier expressed rule "it doesn't work if you never talk about your relationship," which now can be read to be meant as not only descriptive but also prescriptive (i.e., having a moral bearing). In this specific context, the complaint expressed by Victoria also works as a bid for a goal and an agenda for the therapeutic work (i.e., this is something "we really need to get past"). Here the responsibility for change is given to both partners and the sense of a lost agency is presented as shared. Working on the relationship is presented as a moral obligation, a value statement that is difficult to refute within the couples therapy context.

Differing Commitments

In the fourth and last session, there is a discussion about the couple's plans for the near future. It turns out that they have moved into a new apartment, which means that they have had to—and still have to—make decisions about furniture, decorating, carpets, etc. The fourth extract shows a brief sequence of turns from this discussion.

Extract 4

Session 4, turns 180–189

180 V	no but that's just because Alfonso doesn't like it, like right now we don't have any carpets because in [Alfonso's home country] they don't have carpets he doesn't like them, but to me it doesn't feel like home when there's no carpets
181 T	so it actually is a big issue, yeah (.)
182 A	yeah in the end, that's also, it's not so (.) it's not so challenging (.) we'll find some way
183 T	why, why isn't it so challenging, what do you think?
184 A	because maybe sometimes (.) we were having a move, when we moved to this last place, that I was just (.) for example to me (.) a house it's OK, like it's not the most important (.) like for her it's really important
185 V	what?
186 A	the house, like this feels home and this kind of thing
187 V	mm
188 A	but for me not so much or may be to me maybe, some example what could be, if we have to, for example we move to this new place and maybe I don't think that we should buy some new stuff, to me, it's, it's, I think maybe it's just not so important to me
189 V	but for me home is like the most important thing (.)

In turn 180, the issue about having carpets or not is constructed by Victoria as cultural ("right now we don't have any carpets because in Alfonso's home country they don't have carpets"), but also as very personal ("he doesn't like them, but to me it doesn't feel like home when there's no carpets"). The therapist follows by marking the topic as important ("so it actually is a big issue"). Alfonso mitigates the importance of the issue ("it's not so challenging … we'll find some way"), but when prompted by the therapist ("why isn't it so challenging"), he acknowledges a crucial difference in the partners' attitudes ("to me a house … it's not the most important … like for her it's really important … like this feels home and this kind of thing … maybe it's just not so important to me"). Victoria responds to this by making a strong statement, "but for me home is like the most important thing."

In this exchange, the seemingly mundane issue of having carpets or not acquires important metaphorical meaning. For Victoria, having carpets means furnishing a home—"the most important thing"—while Alfonso, even while acknowledging Victoria's stance on the issue, makes it clear that living in a place that "feels like home" is not a high priority for him. There is a clear indication of differences of commitment to the relationship between the partners in these formulations. It is notable that in spite of this, the topic is not expanded on in the session, which ends

soon after this exchange, even ahead of schedule. Thus, the difference in commitment is not brought up as an issue in the therapeutic agenda.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this case study, a detailed turn-to-turn discursive analysis of four conversational episodes from four sessions of couples therapy was performed. The episodes, one from each session, were chosen on the basis of how well they represented and illustrated salient features of how moral dilemmas were presented and dealt with in the data as a whole. The aim of the analysis was to achieve some understanding of how the participants in the therapeutic conversations constructed the moral order of the couple's relationship. The selected extracts from the data were judged to be representative of the total text, both on thematic (what?) and procedural (how?) levels.

The continuous and open-ended process of constructing a moral order was conceived of as the production of utterances, where meanings were given to what was valued in the relationship and what was not, in addition to the loyalties, duties, and responsibilities expected of the partners and the grounds for evaluating actions. In the first episode, a moral dilemma was established concerning Alfonso's eventual responsibility to accommodate his spontaneous emotional reaction (phrased as "fear") and response to Victoria's wish (phrased as "need") to deliberate on her concerns over the relationship. The dilemma created in the second episode could be formulated as the question of whether or not Victoria was justified to claim a position in Alfonso's life that was equivalent (or even more) to that of his family of origin. In the third episode, Victoria sought to prescribe a generic rule of interrelatedness ("it doesn't work if you never talk about your relationship") for the present relationship, again justifying this on grounds of her emotional needs. In the fourth episode, a mundane question concerning home furnishing (having carpets or not) was constructed as having both cultural and personal significance and, accordingly, being indicative of the partners' commitment to the relationship.

Arriving at an answer for the third question of this study ("*Why* was the moral order of the relationship constructed as it was?") can be attempted on two levels. The first has to do with the relationship of the clients. A common component of the moral dilemmas exhibited was how *relationality* on one hand and *autonomy* on the other should be valued. Relationality as a moral value was mostly presented by Victoria, while autonomy was presented by Alfonso. Initially Victoria justified her position by presenting herself as depressed (i.e., weak and needy). This limited Alfonso's possibility of defending autonomy as a moral value. When the focus of the conversation moved from the dyadic relationship to the relationship with families of origin, including Alfonso's conflicting loyalties, the relationality vs. autonomy dilemma was reframed. He found a new position from which he could defend his autonomy discourse, and Victoria was able to show some understanding of it. She could articulate her hopes and wishes for the relationship from a more

agentic position than that of a depressed person. And Alfonso could express his wish for independence more freely without being put in the position of an unconcerned person.

All of this opened a potential space for discussing the commitment of the partners. When watching the videos and reading the transcripts of the conversations in hindsight, as one is privileged to do in a study like this, it appears evident that Victoria and Alfonso had quite different commitments to their relationship. She was very much committed to building a family and a home, while he appeared to still be in a move from his family of origin and in a phase of transition towards independency in his life. The dilemmas and differences in negotiating the moral order of the relationship revealed by means of detailed turn-to-turn analysis make sense as manifestations of these essentially different life situations of the two young adults.

This leads to the second level of trying to answer the *Why?* question. Why was the issue of commitment not brought to the forefront of the therapeutic agenda? This clearly has to do with the initial problem formulation. The issue brought to the attention of both therapists and clients alike was a very psychological one: Victoria's depression and Alfonso's emotional difficulties in dealing with it. From a clinical point of view, it appears that much progress was reached with this issue, and the decision to end therapy was a mutual one. This was what was "visible" for the participants. However, the concurrently ongoing "negotiation" of the moral order of the relationship, as it could be made explicit in the present analysis, appears to have remained largely "invisible" for them, therapists, and clients alike.

What conclusions for the practice of couples therapy can be drawn from an analysis like this? It seems apt to formulate the answer to that question in the form of a moral dilemma: should couples therapists respect the problem formulations given by clients and the space of solutions that they imply, or are couples therapists, on moral grounds, obliged to use some generic understanding of relational problems to bring to the surface issues not defined by clients as problems to be worked on? This question has bearings on the agency of both therapists and clients, and it deserves due attention in debates on the self-understanding of couples therapy.

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