Chapter 11
About Complexity, Difference, and Process: Towards Integration and Temporary Closure

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Therapists and clients are in language and they make use of language. A couple, a family, try to understand each other (literally and metaphorically) just like therapists do in their exchanges with their clients. This is a process in time: meaning, rhetorical figurations, structural patterns, etc. develop in sequences. How change is induced through and during these sequences is a question of special interest for psychotherapy research (Elliott, 2012). However, from a systemic point of view, every communicative intervention, be it verbal or nonverbal, can only be understood as a perturbation (Luhmann, 2012) in our clients: in therapeutic change via communication, there is no unilateral causality. Language as such, with its potential to create diverse implications, is manifold and generous. Therefore, we can ask: how come that individuals, couples, families but also therapists "choose" one meaning—by reacting to one option—and don't choose others? This is a question qualitative researchers are interested in: in what way can the data be understood as meaningful rather than happenstance? How can we grasp the necessity of what we have observed?

This Book

This book has presented a variety of ways to deal with these questions and the challenge we outlined in Chap. 1: the challenge of qualitatively researching multi-actor therapeutic sessions with respect for the specificity of the setting.

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Each chapter is a (re-)construction of the story of Victoria and Alfonso and their therapist(s), and each re-telling differs from the next one. However, what all approaches have in common is the meticulous and careful reading of the transcripts and a commitment to the rich meanings implied in the interlocutors' words. Because of this commitment and the complexity of multi-actor dialogues, the researchers had to choose a lens through which they wanted to look at the sessions; they had to select a focus. These foci were more methodological (e.g., discourse analysis, objective hermeneutics), conceptual (e.g., power, moral order), or related to the material (e.g., the start of the first session, the beginnings of all four sessions). These choices had to be made in order to set the stage for the actual research: the careful retrospective analysis of what happened in the four sessions with Victoria and Alfonso.

Each author explains how he/she understands what happened with the couple in the therapy. They back up their interpretations by the data, and refer time and again to the transcripts, pointing to certain interactions or words that were spoken. In qualitative research, the reliability and trustworthiness of the author's interpretation are also left to the reader, who can judge for him/herself if the way the author understood the words of the interlocutors makes sense in the context.

While different choices were made by the different authors, no one claims to own the truth. Throughout the book, there is an awareness of the complexity of multi-actor sessions that precludes claims of some methodologies being right while others are allegedly wrong. All authors know full well that their approach, while viable, is just one among many valid and useful approaches. The multiplicity in this book testifies to richness and creativity, rather than to competition or rivalry.

Victoria and Alfonso: Some Final Remarks

At a certain stage of a couple's relationship and during the first therapy session(s), the partakers may consider certain topics to be too challenging for the autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela, 1980) of the system. Or, to put it differently: not to risk the breaking apart of the (therapeutic or even couple) relationship, social actors decide more or less consciously not to speak about certain topics during a certain period of their interaction with others. In clinical practice, we all know how multifarious possible turn-takings at the very beginning of the first session can be and we take precautions not to close too quickly the many possibilities language provides us with: the therapist in the case of Victoria and Alfonso knows, on the one hand, about the expectations with regard to his role and that he must give a certain structure to the communication. Nevertheless by asking "Where would you start?" he gives the maximal amount of freedom to his communicative partners and, in doing so, we may say: he starts without starting.

In young couples, like in the case of Victoria and Alfonso, we can witness certain negotiations which are conducted as a developmental task of the couple's system. One of these aspects is the question of loyalty to the family of origin of the respec-

tive partner (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). The positions each person holds in relation to Alfonso's family of origin are ambiguous (as Victoria's parents are not much talked about, these relations are out of focus). Therefore, the couple system can be seen as receptive to therapeutic interventions on this topic. In our case these interventions are clarifying, supportive (especially for Victoria), as well as challenging (especially for Alfonso). The therapist gains a certain power of influencing this developmental task as a socializing agent himself, a structural aspect which can be reflected on, but not denied (Guilfoyle, 2003).

The case of Victoria and Alfonso is noteworthy, as it brings together aspects of an intercultural couple, as well as aspects of a couple where one person is diagnosed with depression. Partners who are approaching a relationship from different cultural backgrounds have an additional task to solve, which is to create a way of integrating their different cultural experiences in their life as a couple. They have at least four ways of dealing with this challenge (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013): (1) they can blend both cultures and rejoice at each; (2) they can coexist: they view their cultural differences as positive and attractive and retain them separately; (3) further, one partner may be more assimilated to the partner's culture than the other one, while this solution is not regarded as a compromise but as the right way of dealing with this issue by both sides. Possible risk groups are (4) couples who do not know what to do with the differences; they might ignore them, which creates insecurities in the relationship.

It seems obvious that the case of Victoria and Alfonso belongs to the last group, uncertain and unstable in their dealing with their cultural differences. As they happen to live in Victoria's home country, she expresses a need to stick to her ideas of a good home. This is difficult for Alfonso. Still, one gets the impression that during the sessions a change manifests in Alfonso, who appears to become more tolerant to cultural differences in his everyday life (e.g., having carpets in the new apartment: yes or no?). As we have no possibilities of a follow-up session, we do not know if this tolerance was more an expression of temporary conflict avoidance from Alfonso's side or a sustainable pattern of positive singular assimilation to the new "home" country.

Subjective experiences of feeling insecure play an important role in Victoria's narration about her being depressed; this is mirrored in research results of interactional patterns of couples burdened with depression (Beach, Dreifuss, Franklin, Kamen, & Gabriel, 2008). Meta-analyses show a highly significant cross-sectional and processual association between couple distress on the one hand and depression on the other (Beach & Whisman, 2012). Humiliating events can be severe stressors and increase the risk of showing symptoms, while personal biographical vulnerabilities (connected to one's own family of origin) may be part of a larger vicious circle (ibid.). It seems that in the case of Victoria and Alfonso, the following aspects are intertwined: a biography of subjectively felt insecurity (Victoria: "I have these issues with trust," fourth session) as a personal vulnerability, triggered by a humiliating event of being "rejected" by Alfonso's family of origin, where she is not able to communicate and feels helpless. The powerlessness increases as Alfonso is not following her wishes to stay in close—even if mediated—contact. Interestingly,

Victoria's fantasized rivals are not other women in Alfonso's home country but his family of origin. She is not afraid that Alfonso connects with another woman but that he cannot disconnect from his mother and his original family (to be remembered: he is the youngest son) to create his own. This could relate to the perspective Victoria may have on their different positions in their respective life cycles: while she was already working before starting her studies, and works in parallel with her studies to make her living, it seems that Alfonso relies financially on his parents and an international exchange grant. While she is speaking about having children together, he is not expressing a clear commitment to Victoria as a life partner. He may be seen as a representative of the new phenomenon of the "in-between age," perhaps not consciously deciding to be irresolute but being influenced by broader social changes (Arnett, 2000; Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995).

Mirroring these dynamics, no attraction to Alfonso's culture is reflected in Victoria's narrations—a *positive* coexistence of the two cultures is not visible at this point of their partnership. An integrated way of dealing with this issue, where both cultures are conjointly "celebrated" seems out of sight: the next Christmas will be spent separately in their two different countries. Nevertheless, Victoria acknowledges the change in Alfonso's contact behavior during his last stay in his country of origin at the end of therapy: he used the mobile phone more often to show commitment (Bacigalupe & Cámara, 2012; Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2011).

Therapy Process and Therapist's Role

All authors in this book have dealt with the complexity of multi-actor therapeutic settings. Some have conceptualized this complexity in systemic ways emphasizing the existence of implicit meaning structures in the couple that can explain interactional patterns. Ugazio & Fellin have presented a semantic approach which explains problems in couples as a result of a semantic mismatch creating misunderstandings and conflicts. The aim of therapy then is to contribute to a greater semantic cohesion as a foundation for trust and positive communication. Borcsa presents a hermeneutical approach. When the couple's complexity is described in terms of interactional patterns based on latent meaning structures, change in these nonfunctional patterns is the target of psychotherapeutic interventions in couple therapy. Therapy then is not only focused on the disruption of these patterns but also on changing the couple's structural rules.

Other authors have preferred to use a more discursive or narrative frame to approach the presented case. Avdi casts a closer look on how talk can be therapeutic. She reconstructs the contributions and the discursive agenda of the therapist, pointing at the fact that the therapist's turns fulfil a function. Wahlström's discursive analysis is bound to the viewpoint of a couple's relationship as a social institution with a particular moral order. Päivinen & Holma describe therapy as a process of storytelling in which the therapist directs the couples' narrations. Reflexivity and acknowledgement of power issues are necessary in order to bring marginal stories to the forefront as results of therapeutic interventions.

Several authors, like Rober, Seikkula & Olson, and Laitila have used a dialogical perspective in that the process of languaging is central. For these authors, the therapist's role seems to be limited to being responsive and favoring a therapeutic presence of empathic listening and a courageous attitude towards exploring the details of the participants' speech. The role of the therapist seems to be to open space for new ways of speaking and to assist the clients in developing a new language. Change can be described as the emergence of new and different voices that allow for the possibility of a real dialogue. Rober has described how such new language emerges in the session, using the central concept of positioning. He changes the figure and background by introducing the model of "dialogical space." This space is the one in which clients and therapists create dialogues as a dance of invitations and responses. The dialogical entitlements evolve in the process of therapy.

While the authors in this book who adopt a dialogical perspective defend the modesty of the therapist's role as a responsive, non-interventionist presence, this viewpoint is problematized especially by Wahlström. He asks significant questions: should therapists take up a problem as formulated by the couple itself and hence confine themselves to the scope of solution such a formulation might imply? Or should therapists rather use their knowledge and experience to address issues that are not explicitly mentioned by their clients as being central to their struggles?

Here we see how very much the stance of the therapist contributes to his own positioning in the multi-actor therapeutic setting.

Towards a Temporary Conclusion

The different authors in this book approached the case of Victoria and Alfonso through theories of language (Bakhtin, 1981; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999), social theories (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Foucault, 1977; Goffman, 1959), systems theories (Bertalanffy, 1968; Luhmann, 2012; Maturana & Varela, 1980), or clinical theories (Minuchin, 1974; Ugazio, 2013; White & Epston, 1990). From each perspective the emphasis is slightly different: we can perceive therapy sessions as a dialogical realization of relatedness through language, as an arena for certain social negotiations, as a field of (re-)production of a system's patterns, or as a portrayal of a representative clinical case.

These possibilities are provided by the material itself, as the researchers in this book applied no specific research methods *to collect* the data (see, e.g., Elliott, 2012). This book's general tenor of using simply videotaped and transcribed therapy sessions as "naturally occurring talk" is reflected in the freedom of the variability of methodologies used by the authors. The different approaches shed light on various phenomena and they extend beyond psychotherapy research in the narrow sense, especially when they focus on concepts like "moral order" (Chap. 10), or "power" (Chap. 7). These concepts invite more general descriptions of social systems, relevant not only to clinical cases but to all couples, families, and other social systems. Here we see that in working systemically (as researchers and practitioners)

we do—and have to—consider characteristics of social life at large; working with couples or families always entails working with structural aspects of mankind as social and discursive beings as well.

This book is living proof of the value of qualitative research for addressing the complex interactions that therapeutic multi-actor sessions are. The different research approaches and tools presented illustrate only some perspectives we can take on couple therapy. They demonstrate the usefulness of studying therapeutic sessions in their specificity in order to deepen our understanding of the conversational processes we call "couple therapy."

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