

Chapter 8

Latent Meaning Structures in Couple Relations: Introducing Objective Hermeneutics into Systemic Therapy Research

Maria Borcsa

In this chapter, my aim is to introduce a qualitative research method named Objective Hermeneutics (OH, also: Structural Hermeneutics; Flick, 2009; Flitner & Wernet, 2002) into psychotherapy research. First, an outline of my theoretical background is given. Then the main principles of the method are presented. By carrying out a step-by-step sequential analysis of a short interaction between Victoria and Alfonso during the first therapy session, the application of Objective Hermeneutics in systemic research is shown. This microanalysis is subsequently embedded into the therapy process. The chapter ends with a discussion and conclusions for couple and family therapy practice and research.

Structural Coupling, Couples, and Socialization

Following Luhmann's (1995, 2012) systems theory, social systems are constituted via communication. Using core concepts developed by Maturana and Varela (1980), Luhmann's sociology does not refer solely to social systems, but distinguishes them from biological and psychic systems, each creating an environment for the others. These systems are operationally closed and follow their autopoietical processes: a biological system functions through its biochemical operations, a psychic system through the operations of consciousness, and a social system via communication. On the one hand, all systems occur in the difference to their environments. On the other hand, they are also in an essential relation to the latter, as all systems need

M. Borcsa (✉)
Institute of Social Medicine, Rehabilitation Sciences and Healthcare Research,
University of Applied Sciences Nordhausen, Nordhausen, Germany
e-mail: borcsa@hs-nordhausen.de

irritations from their environments in order to endure. The irritations do not function in a causal way: autopoietic systems provide in their structures a receptivity, which makes them sensitive for certain irritations—and not for others. The fitting together of structural patterns with perturbations can lead to structural coupling, prompting in the system an irritation dialectically coming from inside and outside. Therefore, structural coupling is the process which ensures that, e.g., the brain, or consciousness, or the social system of communication is constantly supplied with evolutionary irritations. For example, language serves as a coupling mechanism between consciousness (psychic system) and communication (social system). Bearing in mind the autopoietical character of each system, we can see its structures select what effect a perturbation, say, a certain sentence, may have. The term “coupling” indicates that we do not speak about one-sided causality which the environment exerts on the system but about co-evolving processes.

This formalistic sociological theory corresponds in its basic assumptions with bio-psycho-social therapy models (Borrell-Carrió, Suchman, & Epstein, 2004; Engel, 1980) and helps us to recall the complexity we have to deal with in systemic therapeutic settings taking place as communication. If what we are after is couple therapy, we have to take into account the biological and psychological backgrounds of the two persons forming a couple, which is neglected if we conceptualize couples solely as communication. To put it vice versa: even if an end of communication may terminate their *social* system, the two persons will endure on the psychological and biological levels.

As Berger and Kellner (1964) showed earlier, we have to think about a couple in terms of a “nomos-building instrumentality,” where during the couple’s life span two biographical backgrounds of meaning (have to) merge to create a third condition. This perspective stems from microsociology of knowledge, based on Weber, Mead, Schütz, and Merleau-Ponty, an approach where the concept of socialization plays an important role. Being socialized as a human being means to be an embodied part of a meaningful social world, while agents of socialization are all significant others who are physically and/or mentally close to a person. In the processes of lifelong socialization the symbolic organization of the world gets internalized (not necessarily in a conscious way), though it is simultaneously modified by the persons living in it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). These two-faceted processes are biographically cumulative and transformative. A chosen life-partner may play an outstanding role in this development, being potentially an influential agent of lifelong socialization.

In this chapter, I follow a concept of lifelong socialization as structural coupling of the biological, psychological, and social systems, applying this to the phenomenon of a couple. Through communication and physical closeness a couple provides for the psychic system of the partner an environment which is likely to generate “perturbations” and which may serve as an invitation to structural coupling, including biological procreation and psychological growth. This co-evolution will create couple(d) patterns of communication and behavior, those affecting the cognitions and physical constitution of the two individuals as well.

Objective Hermeneutics as Research Method

Objective Hermeneutics (OH) is one of the most prominent approaches to qualitative research in German-speaking countries (Reichertz, 2004). The methodology was developed by Oevermann, Allert, Konau, and Krambeck (1979) (see also Oevermann, 1993) to study socialization of children in families, with the aim to investigate how socialization is accomplished. This is not self-evident, as the question is: “How can children participate in the social world of the family even though they first have to acquire the necessary competences for this?” (Titschler, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 198). Focusing on this inquiry, the OH methodology retains the dialectics of a pre-existing social world and individual autonomy, conceptualizing socialization as an interactive process. Meaning is understood as a social structure that objectifies in concrete interaction, which can be theorized *sensu* Luhmann in the structural coupling of living, psychic, and social systems. Latent meaning structures precede historically and biographically the intentions of individuals and are comparable with the notion of language as a coupling mechanism in Luhmann’s systems theory (for a closer discussion on the compatibility of OH and Luhmann’s systems theory see Schneider, 1995).

OH can be characterized as a reconstructive procedure, aiming at latent structures and social “subconscious”: it refers to those parts of meaning structures that persons are not aware of, even if those structures have factual consequences for them. In contrast to other hermeneutical methods OH transcends the intentions of individuals and therefore claims to be “objective” rather than “subjective” (for early critique of the term see, e.g., Reichertz, 1988). A methodical closeness to discourse analysis (DA) and conversation analysis (CA) can be stated (see Maiwald, 2005), as sequential analytical procedures are a shared way of interpretation. While these analytical methods are not necessarily interested in the specificity of a certain case but more in the production of communicative patterns, OH’s aim is to reconstruct the specificity of a case *as well as* general patterns of social practice. For example, a certain mother–daughter interaction not only informs us about this particular relationship but also about general structures of family interaction; a single case can be seen on its own, but always represents a way of coping with general action problems as well.

In a sequential analytical procedure the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1960) is applied, meaning that “all understanding is conditioned by the prior knowledge of the interpreter and that is extended through interpretation and thereby creates new conditions for understanding” (Titschler et al., 2000, *ibid.*). For this circle, Objective Hermeneutics offers us clear methodological concepts, research principles, and process methods, even if there are variations in the application of OH. Research material should be naturally occurring texts, keeping in mind that the term “text” is understood in a very broad sense, including social phenomena such as pictures and paintings, films or even architecture (Schmidtke, 2006).

No exhaustive English introduction to the method of OH (for an overview see Flick, 2009) exists to date. Therefore, I will follow in central aspects the German monograph by Wernet (2006) and my review of research and methodological

literature in English (Flick, 2005; Hitzler, 2005; Lueger, Sandner, Meyer, & Hammerschmid, 2005; Maiwald, 2005; Reichertz, 2004; Steiner & Pichler, 2009; Titschler et al., 2000; Wagner, Lukassen, & Mahlendorf, 2010). Starting with methodological axioms, I will later address the principles pertaining to the research process and concrete research steps.

Methodological Axioms

To understand the research process of OH we need, first and foremost, some clarifications about the basic ideas of the method. We should remember the initial background of the model, namely the research on socialization. Socialization cannot be conceptualized as causality (say, as an intrusion from outside a system into a system), but more as structural coupling of different systems (biological, psychic, social). Therefore, meaning can be considered as an outcome of interaction, e.g., as meaning for the participants themselves, but also as independent of the participants, being part of the system of communication. Let us have a closer look at these axioms and the implications they have for research.

Text interpretation Oevermann's central assumption is that all social science has to be considered as an interpretive science, as our social world is meaningful ("sinnhaft") and all empirically verifiable statements about the social world are interpretations. OH focuses on the methodological monitoring of the scientific operation of interpretation.

Text as a rule-generated configuration Social interaction does not develop randomly but is based on rules. Every social practice is framed by a rule-governed space, providing possibilities for acting, e.g., constitutive language rules provide participants of communication with a certain range of possibilities as to how to use an utterance. Society's members have tacit knowledge or rule competence, which they normally acquire during socialization. This rule competence functions in concrete social practice and it is also used in the process of OH analysis as the interpreter(s) use their own rule competence for interpretation. Therefore, the concept of rules is to be seen as a bridge between a certain social practice and the method of OH.

Structures of meaning The participants of an interaction do not have complete authorship of the meaning structures in the interaction: they act with a certain autonomy in the sequentially developing interaction structure by choosing specific interactive options over others. Constitutive language rules provide us with a frame of possibilities to communicate, whereas a concrete interaction is *one realized* possibility (OH shares this assumption with CA and DA). Consequently, OH distinguishes between the latent and the manifest structure of meaning. While the latent meaning structure refers to this field of given possibilities of which the actors are normally not fully conscious, the manifest meaning structure refers to the subjective representation. The aim of the research is not to try to get as close as possible to the subjective

perspective of the actors, but to explicate the *differences* between the latent and the manifest structure of meaning. We will come back to this later.

Case structure To understand what a case in terms of OH means, we could use an example referring directly to systemic therapy. Couple therapy can be considered as a social practice where different levels come into play: the individual biographical level (with the respective personal socialization effects by agents like family of origin, institutions, political structures, etc.), the level of the couple as a social system, and, finally, the therapeutic system, comprising the couple and the therapist(s). Each of these levels can become the focus of analysis in terms of OH. Based on the possibilities the latent structures of meaning provide on each level, social actors (be it an individual, a couple, or a therapeutic system) choose from these options. These choices are not contingent, but follow a certain pattern. The latent structures offer different possibilities to (re-)act, but *how* a system (person, couple, therapeutic system) is actually acting gives us information about the structure of the case under investigation.

Case structure reconstruction through sequential analysis The selectivity of a case described above is not static, but has to be conceptualized as a process. The case analysis in the logic of OH does not collect and systematize data. Rather, the researcher reconstructs the sequence structure of the social practice. From a methodological point of view, she/he focuses on the aspect of structural reproduction in the research process, taking into consideration that the case is not completely “inventing itself” on the spot. Instead, a case is considered to be based on dynamic structures (Oevermann is following here Mead, 1934, especially Mead’s distinction of *I* and *Me*), which the researcher reconstructs in the analysis.

One assumption is, therefore, that the case reconstruction can be done with any sequence the material provides - even if there are differences in the richness of the material. For example, if we wish to analyze the therapeutic system, it is useful to start with the very beginning of the conversation in the first session, as we are able to follow how the system is forming its patterns and structure (see Chaps. 3 and 4 in this book). If a communication system has a longer history — like that of a couple — our decision of choosing the utterance to be analyzed may follow other criteria. I will describe this in the next paragraph.

The Research Process: Analysis of a Sequence by Victoria and Alfonso

The theoretical key points are rather abstract and can leave OH novices at a loss. In order to clarify the principles and phases of the research process (Titschler et al., 2000; see also Wagner et al., 2010; Wernet, 2006) I present a step-by-step analysis which serves the purpose of getting acquainted with OH.

First, the researcher should *define the aim of research as precisely as possible. What is the “case” in our analysis?*

The research aim in this study is to *reconstruct the dynamic pattern of the couple*, which might relate to bringing them into therapy and to examining if and, respectively, how this pattern might undergo change. So I will not analyze the therapist(s) and their interventions but focus on the couple as a system.

In the analysis I assume that the couple is not inventing an entirely new “dance” in front of the therapist(s), but performs patterns of the couple dynamics in the session. Yet, we should not forget that they do not cease to be individuals as well (with the potential autonomy to end the couple system), and their biographically socialized individual patterns are also brought into interaction. The therapists as conversational partners fulfill a professional task, never totally free from representing also institutional configurations (see Peräkylä, Antaki, Vehviläinen, & Leudar, 2008 and Chap. 7 in this book), which frame the therapeutic system by communicative procedures. The therapists have to be considered as socializing agents themselves.

As the second step, a decision has to be taken *on the material to be used in the first sequential analysis according to the case of interest.*

The sequence for analysis (see below) was chosen for reasons of being an instance of interaction between the partners dealing with a central and emotionally loaded subject without the therapist intervening in their exchange. We can look at this sequence as a spontaneous enactment (Minuchin, 1974) of the couple’s dynamics. The sequence analyzed takes place 1 h into the first therapy session (total time of this session: 1 h 22 min).

I will now turn directly to this sequence by presenting the research principles and method of OH. The principles of OH explained and applied are (1) verbatim approach, (2) extensivity, (3) freedom of context, and (4) sequentiality (Wernet 2006).

First principle: verbatim approach OH’s methodological premise that our social world is meaningful (“sinnhaft”) and all social practice can be considered text-like has its methodological equivalent in the consistent literalness of analysis.

Second principle: extensivity OH can be considered as a microanalytical approach, going very much into detail of utterances and interactions. This has to be regarded methodologically against the background of the axiom that it is possible to abstract general structures from a special case. As a result, OH uses small amounts of research material, following the claim not to describe or paraphrase but to reconstruct the generative rule (which explains the pattern) of the case.

Third principle: freedom of context During analysis, *the first chosen utterance* will be looked at without taking into account any contextual knowledge. This is a methodological decision to approach the latent meaning structures of a certain utterance or interaction. A context-free explication of an utterance uses *the method of thought experiment* by originating contexts which are compatible with the utterance under investigation. In doing so, the interpreter avoids reconstructing the meaning of the utterance solely from the actual context of the utterance. Bringing in the actual context is a methodically controlled step.

Fourth principle: sequentiality This principle has a central position in OH: the analyzer has to take the sequential construction of meaning into account; that is, she or he should not interpret, say, a question by using the following answer. Only by a strict application of this standard can we reconstruct the structural logic of a certain interaction. The so-called inner context of a case develops again through thought experiments: *what can happen next?* (e.g., after a certain question: who could speak, what could this person say, what arguments can be expected?) By comparing the real continuation with the previously generated possibilities we can develop hypotheses about the case structure under consideration.

Let's now introduce the first utterance of the analyzed sequence:

Speaker 1 (S1): *"They own you"*

Following the method of thought experiment we ask ourselves: In which context could this utterance occur in a meaningful way?

Analysis (1) In the *literal sense* of this utterance there is only one possible meaningful context: that of slavery/human trafficking. Here we could have a more powerfully positioned person saying this to a less empowered one or a representative of the older generation to a younger one, e.g., as an admonishment. (2) In a *metaphorical* way there seem to be two possible interpretations: (a) "they" could refer to relational contexts like family or friends having massive emotional power over the object of the sentence ("you") or to an institutional/organizational system like the working place exercising its total structural authority over the object (i.e. object has no rights); (b) "they" does not refer to persons but to certain powerful inanimate objects like drugs or hallucinatory voices getting out of control.

Now we look for common structural aspects of the created contexts. Leading question: What are the structural features of these types of contexts, especially in terms of positions of the interlocutors?

Analysis The utterer labels, delivers a verdict on the other person's condition: S1 gives a statement from an observer position, while this sentence may express concern, compassion but also superiority or a certain kind of triumph. The utterance places the object "you" into a maximally subjugated position concerning the subject "they" (the hegemony of "owning" implies an inhuman totality). Literally or figuratively, "you" is placed under control in a situation of constraint—and this may be understood by the listener/addressee as a request, demand, challenge, or even as a provocation for acting.

Outline possible options for further interaction What options are available for the next meaning unit? *The leading question is: What could happen next?*

1. *S1 continues*, e.g., gives an explication for this statement or tells something about the background of this judgment, e.g., in a narration.
2. *Someone else reacts*, the "you": s/he (a) could agree; (b) could ask for explanation; (c) could remonstrate overtly; (d) could remonstrate covertly; (e) could change the topic.
3. *Someone else reacts*, who is not the "you", e.g., asking for explanation or coming up with a different topic, etc.

Second and following utterances of the selected sequence:

We now compare the next meaning unit (utterance) with the available options by characterizing the linguistic features of the unit at the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels. *Leading questions: What are the specifics of the following realized utterance? What grammatical form was used (active, passive, conditional, etc.)? What themes are mentioned? Are there any linguistic peculiarities (slips, breakdowns, use and misuse of words)?* Then we explicate the function of the unit in the distribution of interactive roles and positions. *What relations and attributions to persons are given (even if not directly named) or could be implied in the text? (Titschler et al. 2000, p. 206).*

Contrast with the actually chosen turn:

Speaker 2 (S2): “*They think they own me [laughs]*”

Analysis This utterance subjectivizes the declared fact of “owning” into a cognition (refers to “their” subjective construct of reality), while the speaker does not deny the entire purport of the previous account. The change in meaning proposed is the weakening of totality through this subjectivized construction “They think they...” (which excludes context (2b), as inanimate objects can’t “think”) and, through that, a freedom regained by the object of the utterance (“me”). The “owning” becomes one-sided through this shift, a ‘unilateral agreement’ as a special way of relating, *demonstrating that S2 is independent or able to break free from this constellation whenever s/he wants.* By selecting this verbal possibility (S2 chooses (d) out of the possible reactions outlined above) and by, for instance, not asking S1 for a clarification of the statement, S2 takes the topic as established, shared, and significant in the interaction (S2 is not changing the topic). The laughing might refer to a position of felt superiority and/or unease in speaking about this topic, or may serve as attenuation. This (covert) remonstrance makes the first utterance evolve into an argumentative statement, whereupon S2 parries with a counter-argument. This counter-argument may function in that it plays down the content of S1’s utterance—for all listeners and/or for the speaker him/herself.

Summing it up, S2 may follow a “hidden agenda” in the relationship with “them,” e.g., for conflict-avoiding and/or benefit-seeking reasons.

Proceed with the same operations: explicate the potential action space opened by the meaning-structures and contrast it with the actually chosen options.

1. S2 continues to speak (a) staying with the topic by, e.g., giving an explanation for the counter-statement; or (b) changing the topic
2. S1 takes the turn (a) asking for an explanation; (b) remonstrating overtly; (c) remonstrating covertly; or (d) changing the topic
3. S1 laughs as well (shares the meaning implicitly)
4. Someone else joins the conversation

Contrast with the actually chosen turn:

Speaker 1: “*Yeah but as long as they own you they have a right to control you*”

Analysis Although s/he gives an assertive marker (“yeah”) the first speaker sticks to the original assumption, pursuing her/his own line of argument, at first sight without referring to the preceding utterance of S2. Only the word “but” seems to relate this sentence to the previous one, announcing an objection. On the content level, S1 is not referring to the *subjectivization* conveyed by S2, but is explicitly pointing out “control” as a structural aspect of ownership. Moreover, s/he introduces a new facet of “owning”: having the “right” to do something with the object in question. S1 presents—while ignoring S2’s remonstrance and her/his endeavor to point out her/his liberty—a frame of reference distinct from that of S2, entailing an objective order of rights, an indisputable verity, thus an *objectivization*. S/he frames this by means of a temporal marker “as long as,” denoting not only a status but also a potential change in due time.

From an interactional perspective, this semantic and pragmalinguistic choice forms a new round of the argumentation. S1 is speaking again from the position of a noninvolved observer, giving once again an assessment of the other person’s situation. Speaker 1 monologizes through this extended repetition without picking the thread of the other speaker’s previous utterance, demonstrating to the listener(s) and to her-/himself that s/he seems, at present, more convinced by her/his own representation (of hegemony) than by the words and the idea (of freedom) of the other person.

Continuation of the analysis Potential action space opened by the meaning structures:

1. S1 continues to speak (a) staying with the topic by, e.g., giving an explanation for the counter-statement; or (b) changing the topic
2. S2 takes the turn (a) asking for an explanation; or (b) remonstrating overtly; (c) remonstrating covertly; or (d) changing the topic
3. Someone else joins the conversation

Contrast with the actually chosen turn:

Speaker 1 (continues) “*and like really there’s this strong, pressuring thing I feel*”

Analysis S1 continues to speak, now including him/herself into the frame of reference. While “like” may show a search for words, hesitation or a difficulty to start, the term “really” validates the following utterance in advance. The connection to the previous sentence on the content level is not evident, whereas S1 comes up with the vague expression “thing,” specified as “strong” and “pressuring.” This object or entity is referred to as inducing an emotional state in S1, while it stays unclear if “there” refers to the existence of this entity generically, or only circumstantially (at a certain time or a certain place). As S1 speaks of “*this*” and not “*a*” “thing,” the entity is precised and accentuated. This emphasis is augmented through the word order, as the speaker comes up with her/his own perception of the vague entity—not as an observation or a cognition but as a sensation—at the end of the sentence and not at the beginning. Though the speaker implicitly creates a self-description as a sensitive person, the “thing” itself seems to be accountable for her/his emotional state through its massiveness. What may this choice of continuation tell us? Is S1 staying with the topic or changing it? The connection between the two utterances

could be a backing of the counter-statement. If we follow this hypothesis, then emotions are used here as a validating authority.

Potential action space opened by the meaning structures:

1. S1 continues to speak, giving an explanation of the inexplicit declaration
2. S2 takes the turn,
 - going back to the first utterance in this sequence of S1 (a) asking for an explanation; (b) remonstrating overtly; or (c) remonstrating covertly
 - staying with the second utterance in this sequence of S2 (a) asking for an explanation of the inexplicit declaration; (b) remonstrating overtly by denying existence of the “thing” or the “feelings” of S1; or (c) remonstrating covertly
 - changing the topic
3. Someone else joins the conversation

Contrast with the actually chosen turn:

Speaker 2: “*But for example I don’t, how’d you say, I don’t care about that, I just don’t care*”

Analysis S2 also connects using the word “but,” marking an objection and a continuation of the dispute. While starting with “for example,” which would bring in a special situation or case, S2 interrupts him-/herself. The fillers “I don’t, how’d you say” show now a search for appropriate wording on her/his part. S2 (again) does not disclaim overtly the content of the preceding account but expresses a personal attitude to a phenomenon correspondingly vaguely described with “that.” S2 behaves as if there is a (silent) agreement between S1 and S2 on the respective content of their utterances, as ambiguous phenomena are not explicated further and not questioned either. Now, too, S2 follows the line of her/his own argument of freedom and independence here by referring to a personal standpoint (of not caring) as regards the “rights” others may have, also emphasizing it by a repetition.

Interestingly, as “that” is not concretized, it can also refer to the second part of S1’s utterance: to the feelings S1 is mentioning. The “not caring” might refer to the “strong, pressuring thing” and thus mark a contrasting stance one may assume toward “that.” However, it may also be interpreted as S2’s attitude toward the feelings of S1, and thus being understood as an open refusal to empathize.

Again, this echoes an emotionally detached and autonomous position, not only toward the structural aspect of control mentioned, but also against the emotional charge voiced by S1 in the present interaction.

What could happen next?

1. S2 continues to speak, (a) giving an explanation for this statement; (b) now starting with a (provocative) statement toward S1 him-/herself; or (c) introducing a new topic, thus declaring the dispute terminated
2. S1 takes the turn, (a) asking for an explanation for the “not caring” part of the statement; (b) pursuing his/her own line of argument (repeating the previous

interactional pattern); or (c) introducing a new topic, thus declaring the dispute terminated

3. Someone else takes the turn

Contrast with the actually chosen turn:

Speaker 1: “*I just do*”

Analysis The shift of S1 from an external to an internal position in the conversation is completed now: the subject of this sentence is the speaker her/himself, while S1 places her/himself in a binary counterposition to S2, which creates a confrontation. The validity of the “not-caring” proposal as a possible option is not denied, but emphatically (the term “just” is borrowed from S2) not accepted as a choice for S1, interactionally reinforcing the statement s/he gave before. We may say that S1 is again pursuing his/her own line of argument, with the outcome that the repetition of the diverse standpoints creates a communicative escalation and a dead end.

Summary of the Analysis by Introducing the Case

We are dealing with a couple therapy conversation: S1 and S2 form the couple, speaker 1 being female (Victoria), speaker 2 being male (Alfonso). The communication system consists of the two persons speaking with each other and a third person who is not involved here in the actual sequence but is a listener (a male therapist). The concrete verbal context is that the couple speaks about Alfonso’s family of origin (see above context variation: context 2a).

- 348V They own you
 349A They think they own me [laughs]
 350V Yeah but as long as they own you they have a right to control you and, like really there’s this strong, pressuring thing I feel
 351A But for example I don’t, how’d you say, I don’t care about that, I just don’t care
 352V I just do

Taking this sequence as an observer’s punctuation (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967) in a dynamics of this dyad, we may say that Victoria’s sentence (348V) introduces thematic tension, whereas Alfonso stays in verbal contact without explicitly agreeing or disagreeing but coming up with a third idea (of personal sovereignty, 349A). Interactional pressure in the next utterance of Victoria (350V) is increased through her reproduction of the content and the use of appeal to emotions and feelings as validation of credibility; we can describe Victoria’s rhetorical style as emotive; fillers-cum-intensifiers add emphasis to the content of the statement. Alfonso’s reaction (351A) is structurally similar to the one before (remonstrating covertly), referring now explicitly to his independence through emotional detachment. The sequence creates a situation where Victoria is following her own agenda/schema without taking into consideration the dissimilar meaning proposals of Alfonso, whereas Alfonso reiterates to position himself as self-regulated and

(emotionally) independent. This seems to give Victoria a new impulse to reproduce her own communicative pattern.

We may say that the *interactional* behavior (pressure through emotionalized verbal behavior) shows an isomorphic structure (Bertalanffy, 1968) to the *content* (“pressuring thing”) of Victoria’s speech, while Alfonso shows a refusal to take on either the content or the appeal of Victoria’s verbal behavior, correspondingly performing what he is saying. In the course of the argumentation neither the issue nor the tension are resolved; moreover, the latter escalates and ends up in a confrontation.

Development of Structural Hypotheses about the Case under Investigation

By extrapolation of the interpretation of the unit onto recurrent communicative patterns we will look now at relational aspects that may transcend the situation. Doing this, we can expose general relations and structures.

Generalizing hypotheses The two persons perform on the content level as well as on the interactional level the dialectics of emotional involvement vs. detachment. This configuration may create, like in the analyzed sequence, an escalation in concrete communication. Furthermore, in the long run, a negative circle could develop over time as a result of repeating this pattern—on a relational level these oppositions might end up in a demanding (Victoria) vs. a withdrawing (Alfonso) position. We hypothesize that the “choice” of these positions is not coincidental but is based on biographical configurations grounded also in gender structures offered by society’s socializing agents.

Until now we have been expounding the material without taking into account information about the external context. The aim was to inductively analyze the communication pattern without going into an explanation using facts which are not in the material itself. As the next step, we will introduce the external context.

Introducing the Therapy Process

Not to repeat the background of the therapy here (please see Chap. 2), it should be remembered that Victoria had followed a course of individual therapy before starting couple therapy with her partner. As she feels much better now, the goal is to get some help with their “communication problem,” as Victoria summarizes their disputes (first session 390V). Following our generalizing hypothesis, we assume that the analyzed sequence shows both personal as well as relationship patterns and gives some insight into the couple’s problematic dynamics. We will expound this in more detail by taking into consideration the therapy process now.

Victoria, who has infrequent contact to her own separated parents, experienced a rejection in Alfonso's family of origin already during the first visit of the couple to his home country. In Victoria's (and her individual therapist's) narration this played an important part as a trigger for her becoming depressed, introduced very early in the first therapy session. Victoria lives with a lack of control over what is happening between Alfonso's family of origin and her partner. She is excluded from their communication in a double sense: being physically in their presence she cannot understand and speak the language. But also the decision not to visit Alfonso's family because of the experienced rejection is only partly a good solution for her, as she does not know what is going on when Alfonso is in his home country. In the second session she says V243: "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," 244T2: "mm" 245T1: "mm," 246V: "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." Her valuation in the same session is clear: 529V: "(...) they are passive aggressive and manipulative." Her hint that Alfonso could "talk" about the familial relations and, by doing so, clarify her position is not taken by him, see second session, 409A: "Yes then it would also easier that you [to V] could come there, but I feel that's it just, that it could just be me, and I don't know how to say, it's that's just the way I feel about them somehow, I just feel too forced to, now to just change that, it feels something not natural, it would be something not natural." 410T1: "To try to solve this or?" 411A: "Yeah." His decision of distancing himself (in the literal and metaphorical sense) seems to be a strategy which works for him personally, although his parents are not willing to come to visit him/them (a fact Victoria was criticizing already in the first session). He says in the second session, 296A: "But my parents, that's maybe why when (.) when I'm there also I don't spend that much time with them, I don't know, I somehow don't miss them too much, so to me it's like I've always needed my independence and" 297T1: "Mm" 298A: "Maybe somehow I see, my being here is a sort of independent thing, maybe if they don't come" 299T1: "From your parents?" 300A: "Yes" 301A: "So if they don't come here it's not a big deal to me." With regard to Alfonso's family background, the couple's circumstances generate ambiguity and diversity in meaning, which seems to challenge Victoria. Her emphatic statement about the type of relationship between Alfonso and his family (content level of the sequence examined above) and her monological style of communication (interaction level) puts into the analyzed scene a desperate and provocative call to action toward her partner for a completion of a disjuncted personal "Gestalt" (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1994) to contribute to the easing of her lack of confidence (and implicitly to show his attachment this way). By sticking to his communicative and personal pattern of positioning himself as autonomous and emotionally independent, Alfonso, on his part, calls for, proposes and models tolerating ambiguities and not giving in to strange, pressuring forces. Through holding on to this pattern, he challenges Victoria's self- and worldview; she cannot easily consent to the usefulness of emotional independence, as this would mean that she has to tolerate this personal pattern also with respect to herself as a meaning and rule creation for the couple itself (the

building of a “nomos”). Her position “I am asking that I am the most important thing in his life” (second session, 74V) focuses, in contrast, on (total) affiliation and not on independence, while Alfonso’s commitment to the relationship seems not that decisive; at the end of the second session he says 528A: “(...) if I really had to choose and I know you wouldn’t make me choose, if they would make me choose, I would never choose them (.) do you understand?”. This is a distancing position from his family of origin, but not a revelation of belonging to Victoria.

Between the second and the third session Victoria starts working less; third session 15V: “Like after this week, I started working much less (.) it means less money but it means more, more life of my own and for us also, we have time to see each other, so, I think it’s for the best.” Further she learns that Alfonso missed her when he was alone in his home country the weeks before, an experience that generates also new viewpoints for her; 70V: “Yeah and I think that it is just something we see differently, that (.) yeah, I don’t think it’s any big deal now because when he came back from [A’s home country] I saw that, like he had missed me and everything was fine.” Alfonso, being asked about the meaning he gives to the relationship, states later in the session, 222A: “Yeah, yes, the first time of (...) kind of strong and important, relationship” and A240: “I am like happy with that life.” Showing this to Victoria makes it easier for her to tolerate differences and ambiguities.

During the fourth and last therapy meeting, the couple is looking for the reasons why they have had a good time lately. Victoria says, 83V: “And I try to think more and more like, I have these issues with trust, if there is a small thing that, like a very small thing can make me feel like abandoned and that he doesn’t love me any more (.) and I try to take, think like rationally and I force myself to believe in his words even if my (.) like something inside me is telling me ‘don’t believe anything you hear’, I force myself to believe because if I don’t believe his words then I don’t have anything.” Victoria explains how she tries to change her personal pattern of emotional immersion. Her construction is that of a personal struggle between two qualities of herself (“I” and “something inside me”). The emotionally doubting one tries hard to transform into a rationally “convinced” one, giving up the fight for an absolute certainty and a total affiliation, which is structurally impossible. Even if Alfonso’s ability for and need of emotional detachment may be a threat to Victoria (and to the couple system itself), in the long run it might also be a successful stance in freeing the couple from, making them “independent” from, i.e., resilient against depression.

Discussion

Change during the time of couple therapy can occur on different planes: on the level of personal patterns (cognitions, emotions, behavior) and/or on the couple level (the communicative and interactional patterns). Systemic theorists and therapists assume a feedback loop between these processes, with the therapist serving as an agent of

perturbation in these patterns (Ludewig, 1989). The microanalysis of the Victoria and Alfonso sequence showed us that the couple performs on the content level as well as on the interactional level the dialectics of emotional involvement vs. detachment. Furthermore, we saw that this conflict is embedded in the couple's (implicit) "nomos"-building negotiation on the structural aspects of affiliation vs. autonomy every couple has to deal with. Discussing the aspect of change we may say that the couple finds in therapy a way of dealing with their so-called "communication problem" but they do not work on their generative rule of affiliation vs. autonomy. Victoria is still caught up in a personal schema of totality when she states "if I don't believe his words then I don't have anything." The implicit decision of the couple (and the therapist) to stick to the manifest and not work on the structural level might be wise at that moment: otherwise both partners would be challenged to take more explicit positions concerning their relationship—a communicative act which could also lead to the end of the couple as a social system.

The case of Victoria and Alfonso has two specific aspects at which I would finally like to have a closer look: being a couple burdened with depression and being an intercultural couple; the case analysis will be enriched with existing literature on these aspects.

Couple with Depression

Victoria and Alfonso refer to their "communication problem" as "scars" left by Victoria's depression on the couple's level and the reason to come together to therapy. Reviewing the literature on couple therapy and the treatment of depression, Beach, Dreifuss, Franklin, Kamen, and Gabriel (2008) point out that over time a negative circularity is likely to develop in burdened couples: stress is introduced into the relationship through so-called depressive ways of behaving like "excessive reassurance seeking." This elicits changes in the partner's view, creating a potentiality for a negative feedback and the establishment of a vicious cycle, which leads again to more distress in the couple. Beach et al. (2008) conclude: "As a consequence of these converging lines of research, we currently view depression and marital discord as components of a larger vicious cycle that creates a self-sustaining loop." Especially when the time together is more and more used for fights, the danger is that "the positives in relationship may erode over time" (p. 547).

The analysis of Victoria and Alfonso's case supports this viewpoint. The sequence analysis using Objective Hermeneutics highlights the manifest pattern of the so-called "communication problem," but it also reveals an underlying structural problem. The communication problem can be seen as the manifest meaning structure or the symptom of the couple's struggle with the fundamental question of affiliation vs. autonomy, wherein the positions of the partners seem to be clearly marked: Victoria seeks for (signs of) attachment, Alfonso 'needs his independence'. Alfonso, who is some years younger than Victoria, left his home country for studying,

Victoria herself was already working when they met; their ideas of the nearer and the more distant future may likely have been different already in the beginning of their relationship, building a biographical background for the development and consolidation of these positions. Dialectically at this stage of the couple's development what induces their problem is also a protection of their social system: in therapy the couple works with, and improves, their "communication problem". But the 'nomos' stays ambiguous: the (un-)shared needs, values and beliefs are not explicitly discussed, but held in abeyance.

An Intercultural Couple

Existing literature sources (Bhugra & de Silva, 2000; Bustamante, Nelson, Henriksen, & Monakes, 2011; Hsu, 2001; Molina, Estrada, & Burnett, 2004; Sullivan & Cottone, 2006) name extended family relations a primary stressor in intercultural couples: for example, partners feel excluded from their spouse's family of origin, particularly when they are not fluent in the partner family's native language. This leads to an experience of marginalization, especially when family members speak their mother tongue instead of choosing the language of the in-law or a possible third one; that often goes together with misinterpretations and suspicions or conflicts. Further problems might be misguided expectations of the partners based on projected beliefs about other cultures, differences in ways of coping, different concepts of family boundaries and obligations, and conflicts over role division between spouses (Hsu, 2001). The special task is either to find a modified middle path that suits, or at least a path that does not conflict with, either side or culture (ibid.). Bustamante et al. (2011) show that resilient intercultural couples use mechanisms of "cultural reframing." This "third culture building" (ibid.) takes the intercultural relationship as an opportunity to learn and grow in ways that one would not in a same-culture relationship. Even if this process is structurally similar to all couples' developmental task of building their own horizon of common beliefs, values, and norms, some understandings, principles, and behavior might differ in a greater way because of socialization in different cultures. On the other hand, these differences may well be attractive because they free from aspects of one's own culture of origin that are experienced as disagreeable or restraining (marrying-out) (Rosenblatt, 2009).

Regarding the case of Victoria and Alfonso, the above cited positions of affiliation vs. autonomy are complicated by the dynamics of culturally based differences. Victoria wished to be involved in Alfonso's family. The experienced rejection and the meaning given by her to these Mediterranean family relations increase her personal strain and the pressure exerted by her on Alfonso. Her own self- and world-view seems to have traces of a "protestant ethic" (Weber, 1930), with an emphasis on duties and life constructed as struggle - a perspective others and oneself are evaluated from. Interestingly, the main change in therapy seems to happen between the second and the third session, a time where Victoria started working less to have

more leisure time for herself and with her partner. How much this is a trigger for—or a result of—change, we cannot verify.

Conclusion

Microanalysis of couple therapy transcripts as a means of investigating the couple (or a family) is a fruitful endeavor for a researcher as well as a practitioner: through the explication of the possibilities the latent meaning structure of language offers us, we can elaborate alternatives in communicative patterns together with our clients. This is also in tune with the idea of empowering our clients to make fuller use of their options, even if there is no escape from discourse as such.

Objective Hermeneutics can also be seen as a time- and resource-consuming endeavor especially if it is done, as recommended, in a group. Concerning psychotherapy research, the method gives us a possibility to reconstruct the level of change: does a couple or a family create a second order change by altering also their structural rules in addition to their patterns? The relevance is vibrant, as the disruption of dysfunctional interactional cycles and patterns is an important common factor throughout different couple and family therapy approaches, even with very diverse philosophical backgrounds (Sprenkle, Davis, & Lebow, 2009); furthermore, all of the best empirically validated approaches to relational therapy utilize interventions that are focused on pattern disruption (Sprenkle, 2002). Especially in couple therapy with a partner diagnosed with depression, the early disruption of a possibly evolving dysfunctional pattern presents high importance. However, the issue how depression can be conceptualized as an implicit solution for relational structural problems still needs further research.

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