What Do We Do When We Discuss? A Micro-genetic Analysis of Couples' Conflict

Pablo Fossa, María Elisa Molina, Sofía de la Puerta, Michelle Barr and Luis Tapia-Villanueva

Universidad del Desarrollo, Chile

This article focuses on dialogic discursive dynamics present in couples' conversations about unresolved conflicts. The phenomenon of conflict is addressed as a semiotically mediated process of co-construction of the self and the relationship. The purpose of this article is to report on patterns of meaning construction in couples' conflict, with the identification of strategies that promote or hinder resolution. A qualitative exploratory approach was used to focus on the interactional process at the micro-processing level. Eight married couples participated in the study. The procedure considered asking the couple to discuss unresolved conflict. Recorded data of couples' dialogues were transcribed to text and assessed through semiotic analysis using a microgenetic protocol (Molina, Del Río, & Tapia, 2015). The results document the use of strategies for conflict regulation such as psychological distancing, opposition, and generalisation on the border between protecting the bond and regulating tension. The dynamics of non-resolution manifested in polarisation and rigid patterns with increased tension. The 'in-motion' nature of dialogue about conflict is pushed by the semiotic tension that induces variations in subjective positions manifested in speech and actions.

Keywords: couple conflict, dialogic discursive dynamics, semiotic mediation, meaning construction process, regulation of tension

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Key Points

1 Conflict in couple relationships can be seen as a semiotically mediated process.
2 In this qualitative study of eight married couples living in Santiago de Chile, strategies for conflict regulation include psychological distancing, opposition, and generalisation.
3 Couples' conflict involves an interactional process of development characterised by emotional distress and unequal positions of partners, requiring the regulation of unpleasant emotions. Non-resolution of conflict manifested in polarisation and rigid patterns of interaction.
4 Couples' conflict allows the development of the relationship in the sense that it generates opportunities for conversation and experience, promoting growth and deepening of the loving bond.
5 Therapy is a scenario for the generation of meanings not often available, especially when they emerge from opposite positions that are not easily visible. Instead of searching for sureness, ambivalence offers an access to different voices and complex thinking.

Introduction

The study of couples' relationships has turned to exploration of the emotional complexity of the loving bond and its impact on individuals, families, and social welfare (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Tapia et al., 2009). Correlational studies have revealed recursive relationships between couple dynamics and variations in

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Address for correspondence: Pablo Fossa, Faculty of Psychology Universidad del Desarrollo. Av. La Plaza 700, Las Condes, Santiago de Chile. pfossaa@udd.cl

several health indicators. For example, relational satisfaction has been associated with mental health, quality of life, and life satisfaction indicators (Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992). Gottman (1999) has shown that couples with satisfactory relationships over time have fewer chronic or degenerative diseases and enduring life expectations. Couples who are 'successful' in this way tend to resolve approximately 30% of conflicts, leaving the remaining 70% unresolved. The failure to resolve conflict has been attributed to factors such as individual personality characteristics of partners and differences between partners' families of origin, value systems, and ideologies. Success has been defined as the use of resources to find solutions for resolvable conflicts and the tolerance of unresolvable conflicts, with attempts to manage the latter beyond their content (Gottman et al., 1998; Tapia et al., 2009).

In the early 21st century, we have a shared cultural vision that married life leads to the subjective experience of happiness and satisfaction of emotional needs. The struggle for happiness within a relationship affects the ways in which conflict is experienced, managed, and expressed (Gottman et al., 1998; Tapia-Villanueva et al., 2014). The difficulties implied by a couple's awareness of failing to meet large emotional demands push conflicts to take several forms. These manifestations frequently include resorting to strategies of avoidance, pathologising, or dramatising, leading to the failure to address relational issues and achieve repair or reconnection. One of the most negative consequences of conflict avoidance for couples' well-being has been proven to be the dynamic of emotional distance, particularly because intimacy is disturbed.

Tension is part of all couples' relationships. Partners' needs for intimacy, closeness, and commitment lead to the emergence of differences, generating emotional distress. These tensions arise from the inherent otherness of encounters between two individuals. Partners bring to these encounters different histories and patterns of upbringing from their respective families of origin (Rivera & Heresi, 2011; Tapia-Villanueva et al., 2014). The literature describes the co-construction of a couple's identity, the 'we' of the relationship, as one challenge that partners carry forward (Aron & Aron, 2010; Gottman, 1998, 1999; Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006; Saluter & Lugaila, 1998). This process is eminently dialogic in the sense that two subjectivities are de-located and re-located in a permanent negotiation of personal positions, where one must be flexible toward the incorporation of the foreign other. Tensions emerge from differences and disparities between particular positions, generating conflict and annoyance in the relationship.

The ways in which couples make meaning of conflict and the communication strategies they use to regulate it, often fail in the search to make sense of life, particularly how to conserve the relational bond. This problem is often present in cases of separation and divorce. However, tension also brings novelty to the search for relief and making sense of life. Questioning the bond allows a couple to defy modern conceptions of partnership for life and pushes the creation of new and diverse ways of being a couple (Family Science Institute [FSI], 2002; Gottman & Driver, 2004; Katz & Gottman, 1997; Saluter & Lugaila, 1998; Tapia-Villanueva et al., 2014).

The Present Study

The focus of this study is partners' interaction, which is approached as a local and unique phenomenon in contrast with a generalised view. A couple's relationship forms

a complex emotional net that evolves *with* temporality. The partners develop their relationship through communicative action sequences, which are experienced as alternations of harmony and conflict. These fluctuations are often not appreciable or are difficult to distinguish by the partners or an observer. A micro-genetic perspective is useful for the examination of how this interaction unfolds, as it concerns marital conflict and discursive dynamics during attempts at resolution. This approach focuses on the smallest analysis units with developmental capacity. In this case it is the meaning – in course and transformation – that takes place in the negotiation between the members of the couple. The micro-genetic model addresses human processes and the phenomenon of co-construction of the self. Such an approach enables appreciation of transformation and differentiation in the here-and-now progress (Rosenthal, 2004; Valsiner, 2002, 2003, 2004).

According to this perspective, any social encounter follows meaning construction in dialogue. When such interaction occurs between the members of a couple, the two participants position themselves in a process of mutual reciprocity and questioning. The psychological processes involved are understood as dynamic flow and transformation, allowing continuous innovation of the experience itself (Valsiner, 2002). Moreover, psychological experience comprises actions that are *signic* (sign-ic), regarding the creation of signs. The generative attribute of this process means that every action can indicate something beyond itself, a new meaning, and a new self-position. The generative aspect of meaning construction in dialogue points to the concept of *unlimited semiosis* of human life (Cornejo, 2004; Peirce, 1931–1966) and mental processes (Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2000), related to the cultural nature of self-development and the transformational quality of any encounter with another or oneself (the internalised other). Thus, meanings are not static; they are changing and in motion.

The social psychologist Ivana Marková (1995, 2003) has described the dialectical quality of the semiotic process. This quality implies that the construction of meaning involves the process of taking part and counterpart, revealing asymmetrical and ambivalent relationships among signs created during any dialogue, argument, or narrative. This view presupposes a triadic movement, where the difference of perspective generates an emergence to a third part or position, the new constructed meaning.

The subjective positioning of actors in a dialogue generates movements of persuasion seeking, and mechanisms of emotional regulation to manage closeness and distance. Consider the following example:

> What bothered me was that you were playing with the pacifiers and you didn't help me to find them. I'm not angry because you didn't go immediately, I was angry because you just pretended – what are you talking about?

The notion of being bothered addresses the first person of the speaker, her subjective experience and traits which she disposes to show to the other. All the other content refers to her addressee. Thus, a speaker expresses his/her subjectivity, enabling and challenging the regulation and negotiation of the relationship and the self, in every communicative expression – not only in conflict (Bakhtin, 1984; Bakhtin, 1981; Cornejo, 2004; Voloshinov, 1986).

From this perspective, couples' conflict involves an interactional process of development characterised by emotional distress and unequal positions of partners, requiring the regulation of unpleasant emotions (Katz & Gottman, 1997; Tapia et al., 2009). This process of regulation is semiotic in nature; it is mediated by signs, used

to construct meaning through language and other devices. Motivated by personal intentions, the members of a couple bring signs and meanings to an interaction. Through this verbal and non-verbal language, the psychological elaboration of experience is culturally mediated.

The purpose of this study is to elucidate patterns in the micro-genetic construction of couples' conflict by identifying dialogic strategies used to promote and hinder resolution. We also examine how dialogue develops in conflict, exploring the discursive movements used when couples are trapped in dysfunctional dynamics.

Method

In this study, we used a qualitative exploratory approach, focusing on the interactional process at the level of micro-processing. We seek to explore the immediacy of experience through dialogue between partners. The units of analysis were sequences of meaning construction in dialogic interaction between the members of a couple.

Eight married couples aged 30–41 years and living in Santiago de Chile participated in the study. They were selected using a purposive and selective sampling technique. In addition, the snowball sampling technique was used, because the first participants were suggesting other contacts. Each couple participant gave the contact information of at least a couple of friends, relatives and/or colleagues, but didn't interfere in their willingness to participate. At first contact, participants were asked to provide written informed consent and were assured of the confidentiality of information gathered and their permission to request information related to the study outcomes. Couples married for less than five years, with no previous marriage or separation period, and with at least one child, were selected for the study. Exclusion criteria were: psychological or psychiatric disorder, participation in couples therapy, and severe intellectual impairment and/or organic mental disorder.

The researchers visited couples in their homes and collected data using a strategy based on the model of John Gottman (1998, 1999; Gottman & Driver, 2004; Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Gottman et al., 1998). The procedure consisted of three stages and lasted about 25 minutes. In the first stage, couples were asked to discuss everyday and trivial issues. In the second stage, they were asked to discuss an unresolved problem or conflict in the relationship. Finally, they were asked to talk about aspects of the relationship that have enhanced their bond and kept them together. This paper describes the analysis of data collected in the second stage of the procedure.

Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed, then analysed using a semiotic protocol (Molina, Del Río, & Tapia, 2015) based on the socio-genetic model of mind of Jaan Valsiner (2000, 2002, 2003, 2004). This methodology was designed for the analysis of natural texts, and enables preservation of the temporality of dialogue sequences and the emanation or flow of meanings. It enables description of the mechanisms and dynamics involved in the psychological processing of meaningful experiences occurring during session recording. The goal of such analysis is to examine factors stemming from the context and partners' turn-taking during communication, which influence the course of interaction.

This type of analysis is semiotic in the sense that it aims to describe and analyse the human experience as an act of sign and meaning generation, with signs conceptualised as complexes of meaning. It implies that when a sign A is co-constructed (i.e.,

it is a relational, social, and cultural action), its opposite, a non-A countersign, is co-constructed simultaneously, establishing a relationship between signs (Josephs, Valsiner, & Surgan, 1999). This distinction introduces ambivalence and opposition as inherent dynamics in the construction of meaning. The analysis describes sequences of meanings and semiotic strategies for the regulation of differences and tensions between signs.

Two trained researchers in microgenetic semiotic analysis conducted the analysis. Text portions falling within the following semiotic categories were identified in sequence: focused meaning (FM), semiotic mechanisms (SMs), effects of meaning co-construction (ECs), dynamics of meaning generation (DMs), and dynamics of dialogicality (DDs).

FMS are complex meanings or relationships between complexes that are distinguished as foci and refer to the semantic aspect of the sign (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998). SMs are signs that regulate the changing and maintenance of meanings, acting as mediators and directing the emergence of new meanings. ECs encompass extension of the range of significance of previously co-constructed meanings through the construction of new relations of similarity or inclusion between meanings. New elaborations also may emerge when opposition develops between meanings, leading to absorption of the opposition in levels of greater complexity. DMs describe movement from one moment to the next in meaning construction.

These dynamics of psychological processing activate dialogical flux as drives that impel force and movement, and generation of and variability in behaviour; they also provide mechanisms for its regulation. DMs are manifested through semiotic tension, ambivalence, and psychological distance. DDs reflect subjects' positions in the dialogue – as author and recipient – to whom the construction of meaning is referred. The actors take the roles of different parties (including internalised voices) and adopt different positions while participating in the dialogue.

Results

The analysis of couples' dialogues about conflict issues resulted in the identification of the following semiotic indicators. The results described below show SMs, ECs, DMs, and DDs in an integrated and articulated manner.

Semiotic indicators in relation to the semantic aspects of the conflict

This highlights some of the meanings targeted with some variability seen in the content including families of origin, parenting, buying goods, gender roles, common projects, working hours, and personality or individual characteristics.

Semiotic tension in conflict

A phenomenon identified in all couples' dialogues was the tension in DMs stemming from oppositional relationships between meanings in couples' dialogues. Partners took personal positions in relation to their differences, and these positions fluctuated to reflect greater or lesser opposition during the course of the dialogue. This dynamic led at times to polarisation through symmetrical escalation or to elution of the meaning field, generating relief for the interlocutors. In other moments, tension between meanings pushed partners toward the creation of new meanings, leading toward resolution. The following dialogue excerpt reflects this process:

Wife: In my family, when someone is angry you can notice. In your home, you tend to minimise, you have to keep your anger inside and pretend that nothing is happening.

Husband: But in your family, the situation could explode at any time.

In this brief verbal exchange, the wife refers to opposing ways of dealing with conflict in her and her husband's families of origin. She positions herself opposite to the perspective she assigns to her husband (to notice/to pretend). Tension emerges from this construction of meaning. In the wife's utterance, the verbalised sign 'have to' is a type of SM called a macro-organiser. The strategy of using this SM points to higher-order implicit commandments. The term 'have to' is an imperative importing rigidity while reducing flexibility in the development of meanings; it reduces the range of possibilities in the dialogue. In response, the husband uses another SM, 'but,' which brings the focus to competing goals, making the clash between the two statements explicit. The husband's response in relation to the meaning complex [to notice/to not notice (A/non-A)] is situated on the counter-side of the sign, through the sign 'explode,' which points to another meaning field. This new meaning plays the role of an EC named constructive elaboration (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998), meaning that the construction can take a different line, with the development of new alternatives due to the emergence of the new sign 'explode' from the opposition.

Psychological distance

The DM of psychological distance is created when the dialogue turns to the partners' families of origin. This mechanism allows the conflict to be applied to third parties, rather than directly to the partners. These third parties are not people, but generalisations about the families' behaviour. This strategy can be used to cope with the stress of meaning construction, keeping the partners involved indirectly in the conflict. The DM qualities of distancing in this case are generalisation and contextualisation of the subject being discussed: differences between the partners' families of origin or the difficulty of considering the partners' own differences. In relation to the dialogue taking place, importance lies not in the real nature of issues raised, but in the way in which they articulate the constructive process.

Ambivalence

Along with tension and psychological distancing, the DM of ambivalence drives the construction of meaning between two or more positions. This process is exemplified in the wife's next utterance:

Wife: Sure … then do not make me believe that we think differently because they think differently, and we have no problems, our problems are with our families.

In this expression, the dual quality of meaning [in which each sign emerges with its opposite (A/non-A)] is manifested. Through this process, ambivalence is displayed in the dialogue (conflict/no conflict). To deal with this ambivalence, the conflict is shifted to the partners' families of origin through psychological distancing, and the partners are positioned together in non-conflict. This semiotic strategy helps to reduce tension and provide relief.

The use of macro-organisers to overcome opposition

Analysis of dialogues revealed polarisations of meaning and subject positions that generated tension, which at times led the actors to use strategies to obtain relief, highlighting a certain position above the other, and reducing ambivalence and conflict resolution. This strategy can block dialogicality by hindering the expression of different positions and reducing mutual influence on particular meanings. Pseudo-solutions are produced that exclude aspects of significance. Interlocutors make statements that essentially mean 'the issue is settled and no further analysis is needed.' The following exchange provides an example:

Husband: You are very impulsive and I take more thoughtful decisions.

Wife: But if we had followed my way we would have a house . . .

Husband: I think we would not have a house because how would we have bought it? One issue is to want it, another is to do it.

Wife: But I do not necessarily mean a house, an apartment could have been . . . It happens to you that it costs too much for you to make decisions, then I am more impulsive, but it also helps to get things done. No need to spin out the stuff.

Husband: It is not delaying. If we're going to make long-term decisions, we must think long term, and we must see more options. In another context you go and buy the first found, but if you want something long term you have to spin. So on all these issues we have always had differences, you are more impulsive and I am more rational. I like to give it a spin and two laps, three laps if necessary.

In this dialogue, tension and polarisation emerge from the two individuals' ways of dealing with decisions (impulsively/rationally). It exemplifies the EC of polarisation of meaning complexes (impulsive/non-impulsive in tension with rational/non-rational), with each partner positioned rigidly in highly generalised and decontextualised notions. In response to the tension, the wife uses an SM focused on competing goals and introduces ambivalence. Her utterance 'I am more impulsive, but it also helps to get things done' offers the possibility of easing and integrating the interlocutors' postures. However, ambivalence is reduced by the emergence of the macro-organiser; 'we *must* think long-term,' 'we *must* see more options,' and 'you *have to* spin' frame a commanding voice that cancels dialogicality and hinders mutual influence. This mechanism has the effect in this dialogue of closing the construction and generating temporary stress relief through the avoidance of ambivalence.

Opposition in conflict

Another dialogue excerpt exemplifies open conflict:

Husband: I didn't know where the pacifier was.

Wife: But you knew where it was.

Husband: When you called me I was going to get it, I was walking and you had collapsed.

Wife: I was collapsed. I needed help at that moment.

Husband: But I stopped and went fast.

Wife: But I heard from that room – I don't know what pacifier you are talking about.

Husband: But there are five pacifiers!

Wife: What bothered me was that you were playing with the pacifiers and you didn't help me to find them. I'm not angry because you didn't go immediately, I was angry because you just pretended – what are you talking about?

Husband: But look, in my defence, when the dummy fell you were in the room and you saw where it had fallen.

Wife: I cannot bend under the bed. I had collapsed and you did not help me.

This interaction is characterised by differences and opposing positions of the partners as they address a daily conflict. The wife's meaning construction refers to her emotional experience, which entails a state of ambiguous and widespread vulnerability: 'beat me,' 'I needed help,' 'I had collapsed.' The husband also refers to a personal position: 'But I stopped and went fast,' 'in my defence.' Both positions lead to the maintenance of differences and avoidance of encounter or mutuality. Nevertheless, the husband, while positioning himself, also constructs the notion of collapse to address the wife's position: 'I was walking and you had collapsed.' In that particular moment, an EC of growing meaning allowed the wife to explore her sense of collapse and her claim: 'I needed help at that moment.' The FM was the notion of collapse, prevailing in a generalised field with both partners in a very emotional state.

Meaning generalisation established a fuzzy border between the partners in the dynamic of conflict. This border is a point of approaching or distancing from each other. To connect, they need to address the quality of the situated experience and construct meanings to contextualise the idiosyncrasy of the affection involved. This interaction did not focus on the emotional; it remained in a diffuse zone by means of the collapsed state concept. This SM of abstraction helped to avoid direct contact with emotional experience and, consequently, to deflect the pain of conflict.

In this exchange, the 'pacifier' sign acts as a catalyser of conflict, in the sense that it enables dialogue. The discussion continues around it and the meaning construction is developed. The words 'problem,' 'discussion,' and 'dispute' do not emerge, but the dialogue centres on seeking the pacifier, which entails another form of psychological distancing. The 'collapsed' sign maintains the tension of the meaning-construction process at a level that enables the dialogue to be carried forward and acts as promoter of the meaning construction around the conflict.

Different dialogical positions in conflict

In an interaction involving conflict, ambivalence and the differences between participants lead to the establishment of communication that is somehow foreign to both participants' perspectives. The following dialogue exemplifies this process:

Wife: I spoke with the director of xxx and he asked me to work with them. But I don't know. Really it means more money but also more stress and more possibility that I will get home late. I do not know what to think about that.

Husband: It's your decision; it's your future, not that of the family.

Wife: But it would not influence so much if I come home later?

Husband: Obviously.

Wife: So it's still something we should consider, you know? On the one hand more money, but on the other I would be at home less.

Husband: If you would get home every night complaining because you are tired, then do not take it. You'll never see us.

Wife: No but it is not only like that.

Husband: It's your decision, I cannot stand you getting home angry every day.

This excerpt shows strategies of dealing with conflict that are characterised by ambivalence and multiple differences in voice between and within the partners' utterances. For example, the wife expresses her doubt and demands a response from her husband to help her decide; when he takes a clearer position, however, she points to the counter-side. The SM of competing goals – 'more money on the one hand, but on the other be less at home' – maintains tension, opposition, and ambivalence in the wife's self-dialogue. The husband, in turn, shows ambivalence by referring to his negative expectations about the decision while placing the responsibility for decision making on his wife. This example shows the way in which the couple handles tension to keep the dialogue flowing, although they do not arrive at a common idea or solution. The last utterance leaves the conflict unresolved and sets the poles of the disagreement; the wife makes the decision and the husband experiences the emotional repercussions.

The SM used to regulate the tension of the different voices emerging in conflict is harmonious coexistence (of meanings), as shown in the following excerpt of a dialogue discussed above:

Wife: In my family [of origin], when someone is angry you can notice. In your home [family of origin], you tend to minimise, you have to keep your anger inside and pretend that nothing is happening. I'm not saying that one method is better than the other.

Husband: That means that I try to have a non-confrontational attitude.

Wife: Yes, okay. But that is not good because you stay with all the rage instead of expressing it.

The strategy of saying, 'I'm not saying that one method is better than the other', regulates the polarisation of positions by placing the different perspectives on a symmetrical or balanced level, reducing stress and allowing the partners to tolerate ambivalence. This SM of harmonious coexistence of multiple voices ('both, and' instead of 'either, or') is helpful in the dialogue. This strategy displays the wife's openness to the validation of her husband's position, who responds with regard to his experience and the relation of new meaning: 'I try to have a non-confrontational attitude.' The wife's welcoming response of 'yes' expresses the provision of care, reception, and connection, and continues onto a new field of meaning about 'what is good.' The construction of meaning around this field facilitated the expression of emotions in this dialogue, enabling the couple to seek a solution and maintain a connection while having differences.

Discussion

The analysis of dialogue provides insight into the phenomenon of couples' conflict and negotiation of its situated and relational qualities. From the semiotic perspective, it implies an encounter for the co-construction of meanings, where mutuality and intersubjectivity are in play at all times. The dynamic of tension that manifests in the asymmetry of partners' subjective positions can calibrate the intensity of exchange and stimulate the use of resources in efforts to obtain relief and care for the bond. The differences between positions are both explicit and implicit, related to emerging and varied content, including the partners' families of origin and work projects, the coordination of housework distribution, home buying, and parenting.

The study data evidenced certain behaviours characterised by inhibition and discomfort of the participants, who were engaging in a dialogue prompted by the researcher, rather than one developing spontaneously. This factor raises the issue of social desirability associated with the context of data collection: couples were instructed to 'talk about an unsolved problem' while aware that the researcher was focusing on their representations of couples' conflict. Disagreement arose in only some of the participants. No associated anxiety, anger, or fear emerged, as it often does in spontaneous conflicts between couples (Tapia et al., 2009). Moreover, the data collection strategy focused on the ongoing interaction as a phenomenon situated in the time and space of the here-and-now experience. This approach allowed observation of the emergence of constructions 'about the conflict' and genuine dialogic phenomena.

From a semiotic and meaning-focused perspective, raising the issue of conflict entails the presence of tension from the beginning of the encounter. This tension may emerge from the ideological and emotional quality of conflict in the social game. The desire to maintain social desirability may place the couple on a border between the development of dialogue about a common conflict and the search for validation in the context of the values of social coexistence. This tension between emotional and cultural values is present in every moment in human interaction, as another level of recursion, given its inherent cultural quality. It is also situated in the therapeutic context, in which the couple builds stories about how they have come into conflict for the therapist.

Semiotic analysis enables the identification of patterns and mechanisms used by members of couples to confront, prevent, or resolve conflicts – or to recognise the aspects of conflicts that keep them trapped in circuits without resolution. The main difficulties of resolving and learning from conflict are related to the dialogical strategies used to obtain relief from the tension of tolerating differences and opposition. Thus, important aspects of the results relate to how couples regulate the meaning of 'conflict,' and with what culturally validated signs or actions they convey it. The ways in which partners understand conflict influence the dynamics of the relationship. It is important particularly for emotional connection, which maintains mutuality and makes possible the generation of a pair identity and common project.

Couples used resources referred to as circumventions to address social representations of 'conflict.' Circumventions are strategies used to approach the meaning field of conflict/non-conflict indirectly. A border zone appears to be bearable to the partners who access it by means of strategies that afford effortlessness to the context in which the experience is lived. The most frequently used strategies involve psychological distancing, taking action to reduce contradictions through the construction of

macro-organisers, and resorting to generalisation. The apprehension involved in facing conflict is related to the exposure of one partner's helplessness in front of the other. When the conflict is diverted from the couple to a third party, the couple and the partners cannot be positioned directly, subjectively, and emotionally facing each other. In some cases, the conflict or difficulty for a couple lies precisely in not opening a conflict. This type of interaction involves the dread of challenging oneself or the other, which at certain times can be a strategy for taking care of the relationship; however, it hinders the partners' acknowledgement of couple-hood, self-awareness as a couple, and the development of intimacy.

The couples' use of strategies aimed at protecting the bond from the influence of others was particularly notable in dialogues related to their families of origin. Through these interactions, members of the couples sought to develop personal positions that may differ from those of their families of origin and their partners'. These strategies are displayed in dialogues through the internalisation of the voices of family members. Hence, more than two individuals are involved in the encounter and the negotiation. This dynamic of the dialogical self allowed partners to create distance from the less-accepted aspects of the relationship, themselves, and the other. These aspects, seen as other positions, are shaped in other addressees, especially when anger and guilt emerge in the interaction, enabling one partner to avoid directly hurting the other.

Conflict as a semantic field involves multiple aspects of the relationship in a negotiation, yet it is experienced with discomfort. The study data showed that conflict emerged in the efforts of partners to address the effects experienced, which involves dealing with anxiety, guilt, fear, emotional deprivation, and rage. In this type of interaction, signs of conflict negotiation focused around meaning allow the scaffolding of experience, dialogue, and encounter. This process may lead to decision making when movements of overcoming occur and new meanings emerge, which includes conflicting polarities as different aspects of the same phenomenon.

The constructive dynamics of conflict discourse evidenced flexibility of the subjects' positions. The SM underlying this flexibility was the harmonious coexistence of opposing meanings, which has the effect of reducing the polarisation of meanings, that is, differences are not fixed and otherness is acceptable. In this context, ambivalence emerges as a resource, integrating opposing perspectives on a wide range of meanings. Hence, this process entails complexity and constant transformation; the notion of stability, as a passing condition, must be considered. In this temporality, the issue of influence becomes relevant, and the partners' different positions in the dialogue are pertinent, together with the ability to respond to the other's complaints.

Dynamics that do not lead to resolution are characterised mainly by polarisation and rigid patterns, with increased tension. In these cases, meaning construction tended to stagnate as a closed circle, and the dialogue brought meanings similar to those already constructed, without novelty. Thus, meanings and their values remain stationary along the course of the conversation in the attempt to reduce tension, but this approach prevents progression toward conflict resolution. This dynamic accounts for the loss of mutuality and intersubjectivity, which in the language of the relationship concerns the loss of intimacy and emotional closeness.

Recommendations for couple therapists

Some recommendations for couple therapists based on this research study include the following. First, the therapist is a witness of the couple's experience and explores and

offers meanings of the co-construction. Change in therapy is viewed as a productive event that occurs in a particular moment of encounter; therefore, it occurs in the couple's regulation where the role of the therapist is more peripheral. Secondly, dialogue takes place in different ways, assuming different positions and counter positions; conflict is not seen as unproductive when it encourages new meanings. Therapy is a scenario for the generation of meanings not often available, especially when they emerge from opposite positions that are not easily visible. Instead of searching for sureness, ambivalence offers access to different voices and complex thinking. Thirdly, the therapist is a mediator. For example, she or he may counterbalance the unambiguous position of one partner, supporting the other and holding it as a response to the position of the first. The role of the therapist as a mediator allows reflection about how balance is handled in couple therapy. Last, this process proceeds over time through continuous movements that may not be appreciated by an observer or by the therapist. For therapy training, video recording of the sessions enables analysis of the management of tension, ambivalence, and opposite meanings in the dialogue.

Conclusion

This study attempted to describe discursive dynamics of dialogicality in couples' conversations about unresolved conflicts or problems in the relationship. The findings show that couples' conflict allows the development of the relationship in the sense that it generates opportunities for conversation and experience, promoting growth, and deepening of the loving bond. These encounters are experiences that are unfolding through micro-evolving moments that take different shapes, such as distance, fracture, and misunderstanding, as well as proximity, complicity, and intimacy.

The findings of the present study contribute new ideas and distinctions for couple therapists concerning how to understand the couple relationship as a phenomenon located in time and space and providing suggestions about how the couple can move ahead in their life course. This 'in-motion' process is pushed by semiotic tension, which spurs development as it catalyses variations in participants' subjective positions in interactions, manifested in speech and actions. Therapists involved in marriage counselling are main players in the co-construction of a new sense of the couple relationship; their skills unfold in the dialogue for regulation of the tension – involving the increasing or the relief – that emerges in every interaction.

The current study provides therapists with study tools to elucidate the use of resources to facilitate or hamper mutuality and empathy. It looks for a new comprehension of the dynamics of romantic relationships and relational processes in general in understanding the complexity of the human encounter at all levels. It attempts to address Valsiner's thinking in challenging the limitations of inductive generalisation from quantified phenomena or qualitative descriptions based on common sense and includes some discourse analysis. This study proposes that research needs to approach complex human systems using flexible structures in the process of transformation. Valsiner's (2014) proposal in his own words goes further: 'Analysis of such systems requires a new look at methodology. It is demonstrated how this new look is actually a historically old one—replacing the primacy of inductive generalization by the dynamics of generalization that takes place between deductive and inductive lines, with a special hope for the use of abductive processes' (p. 3).

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