

NEGOTIATING OPEN AND HIDDEN POWER STRUGGLES IN COUPLE COUNSELING: A CASE EXAMPLE

Yvonne Schürer

Adlerian training analyst and psychotherapist in private practice

This article was published in Spanish. This is the English version.
Link to the Spanish version: (<http://revistadepsicoterapia.com/rp102-04.html>).
How to reference this article:

Schürer, Y. (2015). Negociar luchas de poder abiertas y tácitas en la terapia de pareja: Un ejemplo de caso [Negotiating open and hidden power struggles in couple counseling: A case example]. *Revista de Psicoterapia*, 26(102), 49-59.

Abstract

In couples counseling it can be challenging to find ways to engage partners in being more receptive to each other's needs, and in helping them learn more efficient ways of conflict resolution. Through use of a case study, a structured, and yet flexible way of leading client dialogue will be demonstrated, showing how the counselor can make sense of the chaos to then facilitate and promote mutual understanding and receptiveness between partners in conflict. The theoretical basis of this approach to conflict resolution is described, one grounded in the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler. Concepts such as social embeddedness and the need to feel belonging, inferiority feelings, and the individual's psychological movement away from feelings of inferiority are addressed from the perspective of couples relationships. The approach described provides a technique for uncovering and negotiating the power struggles intrinsic to couple's conflicts, and shows how partners can find the courage to relate to the other in a way that meets their personal needs, the needs of the other, and the needs of the relationship.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, couples counseling, understanding and negotiating power struggles

Resumen

Encontrar la manera de involucrar a la pareja en hacerse más receptiva a las necesidades del otro puede ser un gran reto en la terapia de pareja, al igual que en aprender estrategias más eficaces de resolución de conflictos. Mediante un estudio de caso, se ilustra una forma estructurada y a la vez flexible de conducir el diálogo con los pacientes, y cómo el terapeuta puede dar sentido al caos aparente y, a continuación, facilitar y promover el entendimiento mutuo y la receptividad de la pareja en conflicto. La base teórica de este enfoque para la resolución de conflictos es la Psicología Individual de Alfred Adler. Conceptos como el arraigo social y la necesidad de pertenencia, sentimientos de inferioridad, y los esfuerzos para compensar los sentimientos de inferioridad se abordan desde la perspectiva de la relación de pareja. El enfoque descrito proporciona una técnica para el descubrimiento y la negociación de las luchas de poder intrínsecas a los conflictos de la pareja, y muestra cómo los cónyuges pueden encontrar el valor para relacionarse de una manera que concilia las necesidades personales con las del otro y las de la relación.

Palabras clave: Resolución de conflictos, terapia de pareja, luchas de poder



Introduction

Having worked with couples in conflict for over 35 years I have become quite an expert when it comes to power struggles. I am not dissimilar to one of those dogs at the airports that sniff around for drugs in the unsuspecting traveler's baggage. That is, I believe I am able to detect power struggles in any area of a couple's day to day life. And I am equipped with some useful tools to help deal with this phenomenon. With the help of case material I am going to present one of those tools, a method to help reveal the open and hidden strategies employed by partners in conflict.

Couple counseling, as we all know, is not an easy task, for many reasons. Perhaps, the greatest obstacle we face here is the fact that our clients mostly pursue somewhat ambivalent goals: On the one hand they want to improve the relationship they have with their partner, but on the other hand they want to win in their fight against them. They have arrived at the point where they believe their partner no longer understands them, and that their living together has lost much of its former quality. They had other ideas of how a marriage or a partnership should be. They feel hurt, they feel deceived, they feel "way down". Thus, when a couple wants counseling, we generally have to deal with two desperate fighters, who originally both had the best intentions. But as the years have passed they have been getting themselves entangled in ever-escalating problems, and by the time they arrive in our practice they feel completely lost, not knowing which way to turn.

Therefore, in most of the cases, our first task will be to rearrange things, to bring some light into the chaos.

When it comes to conflict resolution, according to Rudolf Dreikurs (1972) the first essential point is "to be able to see the goal behind the conflict". For this reason, during counseling sessions, I want my clients to get an overview, which can help them to look at their fights from a distance, as if they were to assume the position of a detached observer. Their first step would be learning to **observe** what is going on. You can bet that our clients have already made their observations, and both of them are more than ready to give their counselor a good briefing. In one of his workshops, Rudolf Dreikurs compared the information we get from both partners with the script of a theater play: Each client can only tell us half of the script, because he or she does not remember his or her own part. But what is remembered very well is what the other said and what the other did.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate, with the help of a case example, an Adlerian approach to conflict resolution in couple therapy. Let me illustrate this with the help of case material:

The case of Estelle and Ron

My clients, Estelle (36) and Ron (40) had been married for 12 years before they realized that they needed counseling. They told me that in the first years of their relationship there had been long periods of peace and harmony, which were

disrupted now and again by short periods of mutual discontent. But they could always find reconciliation. What happened though, as the years passed, was that the times of disharmony prevailed, until after 12 years they were both convinced that their partner had changed for the worse.

I am not going to outline the entire counseling process, which of course included highlighting the differences of their lifestyle goals and clarifying their understanding of their gender roles. Here I would like to focus on the ingrained power struggle, and the way we worked with it during our sessions together.

After a recent, very unpleasant journey, Estelle recounted a previous incident that had happened at her mother's home:

Suddenly my Ron came storming into the kitchen shouting: "Could you stop talking to your mother and get your things ready?"

I tried to ignore his aggressive tone, but he went on: "I am warning you: If you are not ready in time you can stay where you are. I shall leave this place in 30 minutes."

Ron then gave his version of the story:

I had been waiting far too long. I did not intend to intrude, because my wife was having an intimate conversation with my mother-in-law. But, all the same, I had to remind her that we had to catch our plane. She completely ignored me. She treated me as if I didn't exist. She sighed, she shook her head and went on speaking to her mother in a soft voice. I went out; I waited for another 10 minutes. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer and gave her a second warning. She said in an icy voice: "I shall be ready in time. Mind your own business. Can't you see that I am having a conversation with my mother?"

How can we see the facts of the situation, when our clients have as Adler (1929; 1931; 1938) would put it, such a "biased apperception"? Both claim to be the victim of their partner's aggressive behavior and both are convinced that they themselves have been behaving in an appropriate way. We could come to the conclusion that they are trying to confuse us, to mislead us, and that we must try to obtain a more objective view – perhaps, somewhere in the middle of both statements.

But this would be all wrong. We have to observe what is going on - yes. But we also have to look at each of the two stories separately without comparing one with the other. It is the inward dynamic, the innermost, delicate workings of the psyche of a person, who is telling us about the incident, which should indeed be the focus of our attention. Therefore, even if the wife were to state she had been hit by her husband - even then, we should forget about the facts. They are irrelevant. We must concentrate on understanding a victim's experience, on the way he or she felt, and how he or she was dealing with the facts, and we need to do this from both sides.

There is only one way to create a firm basis for mutual understanding: We have to give room to each of the partners to enable them tell their tale without the fear of being interrupted. However biased it might be, however far from the so-called

“facts”, the partner isn’t allowed to interfere either verbally, or non-verbally.

And this is where the difficult part of the counseling process comes into the picture: We have to make each partner listen carefully to the story that the other is telling. This means **they have to listen to the other’s representation of their own wrong-doings**. And they also have to ‘listen’ to the feelings, which the narrator has experienced during their quarrel. I must admit this is tricky and that this is not an easy task and sometimes we do fail.

But once we succeed in winning him or her over; when they all of a sudden dare step into the boots of their mate, when they begin, according to Adler (1928/1982), to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another, i.e. when at last their *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, their social interest, their love is reactivated, then, and only then, we can proceed to the next step of conflict resolution, which is to understand what is going on: Our clients must be able to **see their goal behind their conflict**, which, according to Dreikurs, is the second step of problem solving.

Here, the counselor can be of great help to the couple: He/she has the advantage of knowledge. Thanks to psychological models, the Adlerian model for example (Pew & Pew, 1997; Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci 2007), he is able to build a professional hypothesis about the discouraging dynamics, which are at work in his clients’ partnership.

The Ping-Pong Effect

And how can the counselor transfer his way of looking at things, his suppositions, to his clients? Applying the metaphor of a ping-pong game to the situation - that is to a couple’s power struggle, could be an important first step towards a more objective perspective. In order to make this understandable to clients, we may use the metaphor of the ping-pong effect, in form of a paper handout clients receive.

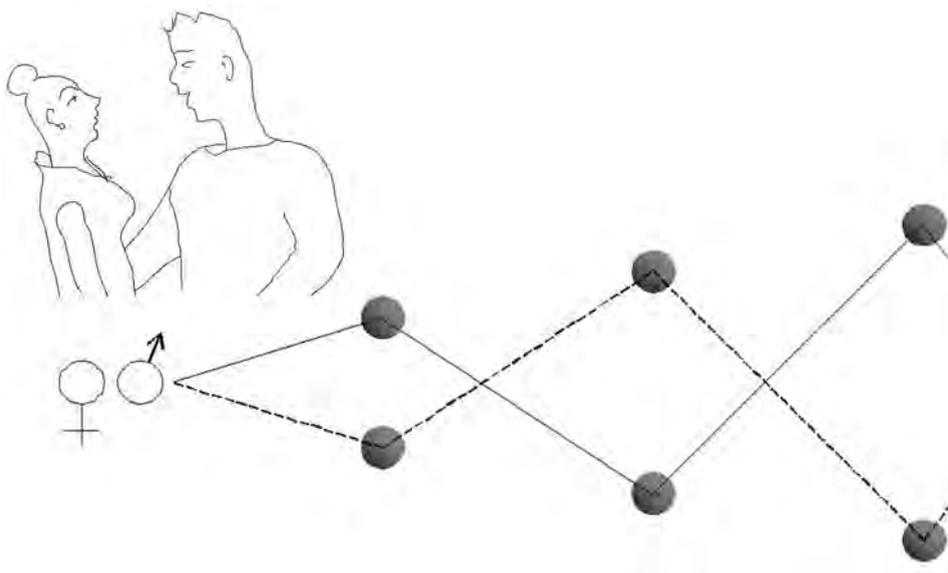
Visualization is a great help to them when it comes to understanding the ups and downs of their daily fights. Lying at the heart of the idea is actually Adler’s model of the individual striving for superiority.

In order to help clients understand the power struggle, we may tell them the following:

We all feel good when we are convinced that we belong somewhere and that we are respected as an equal human being. As long as this condition is granted, an individual behaves in a friendly, cooperative way. But as soon as the person gets the impression of being in a lower position they immediately become self-conscious, self-focused and self-oriented. The deeply-rooted conviction of being “way down” manifests itself through a surge of strong, negative emotions: hate, shame, fear, or isolation. These feelings are a warning sign. Because human beings are inherently of social nature (the Adlerian concept of social embeddedness), they cannot endure to be left out. They need to belong somewhere – i.e. to their social environment.

Figure 1. The Ping Pong Effect

© Yvonne Schürer, Zurich



As soon as their need to belong is jeopardized, their internal alarm goes off, sending out a message “You are out!” Immediately their inferiority feelings urge them to compensate for their unfavorable situation. The mechanism that is responsible for this striving towards regaining a good position is then activated. They start to force their way “upwards” in order to overcome the feeling of inferiority and get back to the place where they would regain that lost feeling of belonging and worth. Unfortunately, individuals rarely achieve their goal to get the feeling of belonging, of embeddedness back. As a reaction to the fear of being left out, they tend to exaggerate their upward movement and strive for superiority.

The trouble starts with inferiority feelings

As far as couples are concerned this applies to both partners: As long as both are feeling equal there is no need for couples counseling. As soon as one of the partners begins feeling inferior trouble starts: He or she might feel neglected, overruled, or hurt - whatever. It doesn't really matter. It doesn't even matter if the feeling is traceable or whether the experienced “wrong” is based on a mere fiction (i.e. a subjective perception). It's the emotions that count. These emotions are urging them to get even, to be on top again. And from that moment on a friendly exchange is no longer possible; the harmony is broken.

Pushing the partner down

This is generally the moment when one person in the relationship starts using their power as a weapon against their partner. The easiest way to get on top is to push the partner down. No matter in which way whatsoever that they let the other feel their power – whether it be by using hard words, violence, silence, by refusing cooperation, or through sexual rejection - the result will always be the same: Their partner, now, is feeling misunderstood, hurt, abashed - whatever. The partner, then, also will experience inferiority feelings and use all his/her energy to overcome them. It is like a ping-pong game: each strike provokes a counter strike. Their aggression level is constantly rising. And there they are, in the middle of a power struggle, which may go on and on.

So far, this has been the explanation regarding the dynamics of the power struggle that I generally give to my clients.

Looking at the incident through a magnifying glass

Now let me take you back to the case of the couple who got into a fight before heading to the airport. In the counseling sessions we are now going to look at the short incident through the lens of a magnifying glass. In this case I started with the story of the woman, because, in this session, she was the one who brought up the problem.

From now on I am working with the Ping Pong Effect Scheme. I fill in the peaks and the low points in accordance to my client's feelings.

Estelle said:

Suddenly Ron came storming into the kitchen shouting:

“Could you stop talking to your mother and get your things ready?”

Now I ask her how she felt at that moment, and she says:

“I was irritated and angry. It was very important to me to give my mother the feeling of intimacy and togetherness before I left. And my husband was behaving like a wild boar. Therefore, I also was embarrassed. His boldness doesn't fit in with the refined manners my mother is used to.”

(Low point)

The second statement of Estelle:

I tried to ignore his aggressive tone, but he went on:

“I am warning you: If you are not ready in time you can stay where you are. I shall leave this place in 30 minutes.”

At this point I was feeling enraged and I had to use all my self-control to keep my mouth shut. I also felt helpless, because I was at his mercy. He had the keys to the car, he had my ticket, he had my passport, - my hands were empty.

(Lowest point)

When we listen to this woman, it looks like she had always been in the lower position and that her husband had constantly had the upper hand.

But we must ask ourselves: “Where are **her** peaks, which are the moments, when **she** can feel above him?” How, in which way, did she compensate for her inferiority feelings? In other words: How did she fight back? How did she maintain her self-esteem? How, did she get “even”? Well, she doesn’t tell us, - and probably she can’t. The problem is that she cannot tell us, because these things happen outside her conscious awareness.

However, we can guess that Estelle was feeling superior to her husband. (She calls him ‘a wild boar’ and she lays great stress upon the refined manners that prevail in her family. It is from this that we can infer she feels morally obviously way above him.) But during the session she didn’t allow me to go into this. When I tried bringing it up, she didn’t even know what I was talking about. Later, as the result of our ongoing counseling sessions, she learnt to see her own attitude in a new light. Instead of professing to be the helpless victim she dared to have a critical look at herself. She understood the passive aggressiveness of her attitude, the devastating power of her moral superiority. But some training was necessary and a great deal of encouragement before she could reach this point, finally seeing the peaks of superiority of her inner dynamics.)

Let’s now examine the husband’s story:

I had been waiting far too long. I did not intend to intrude, because my wife was having an intimate conversation with my mother-in-law.

When I inquired about his feelings, Ron said: *I was getting nervous and very tense. I felt unfairly treated.*

(Low point)

But, all the same, I had to remind her we had to catch our plane.

(Peak: He sees himself as the reliable one who is meeting the needs of the situation.)

Estelle completely ignored me. She treated me as if I didn’t exist. She sighed, she shook her head and went on speaking to her mother in a soft voice.

I felt rejected. She was treating me without respect. She showed me that I was a nobody.

(Low point)

I went out, I waited for another 10 minutes.

I became more and more nervous; I was very angry.

(Low point)

Finally, I couldn’t stand it any longer and gave her a second warning.

It was my duty to remind her. She should have been glad that I did care.

(This is a peak. He feels he had a right to intrude, as he did it for a good cause.)

She said in an icy voice: “I shall be ready on time. Mind your own business.

Can’t you see that I am having a conversation with my mother?”

I felt humiliated and helpless like some little boy who is getting reprimanded by his teacher.

(Lowest point)

Here a very painful, humiliating memory of Ron's childhood pops up and he starts to cry.

Ron's Early Recollection:

There was a party in our school. The First-year children were also allowed to perform something. I was very proud, as the teacher had given me an important role to play. To start with, the children from my class were to play a game on the stage and then all run away at the same time and call out, "It's raining!" Then I was to come on stage with a big umbrella and sing, "Rain, rain, go away, come again another day. All the friends want to play. Rain, rain, go away!" That was the plan. I waited keenly behind the stage curtain, so as not to miss my cue. Suddenly all my other classmates came running off the stage and pushed me to the side, blocking me in. I tried, but couldn't fight my way through the crowd. The teacher was already playing the introduction to my song, and the others were still in my way. The teacher was playing the intro to my song for the third time when I made it on stage. Everyone laughed and I couldn't utter a sound. In the end the teacher sang the song herself. I stood helplessly under my umbrella, not knowing whether I should stay there or leave the stage. I was so ashamed, but also angry with the other children and the people who laughed at me.'

In Individual Psychology, early recollections are regarded as metaphors, containing all the crucial elements of a person's lifestyle (Kopp & Crow, 1998). They show us how an individual perceives the world; they show us his fears and his goals of superiority.

With this memory Ron is presenting us his lifestyle on a silver platter. He tells us how he would like the world to be ideally, i.e. that all should happen as planned. It is easy to see that Ron wants to be a good boy, a very capable and reliable person. He loves to have important tasks and he does his best to fulfill them to perfection. He tries very hard to have everything under control. He also lets us know how his happiness can fall apart. Disaster occurs when others behave irresponsibly. Through their carelessness his performance is botched and with this they destroy his happiness, his honor and his pride.

Watching the ping pong game through the magnifying glass often has this effect: When the clients are invited to scrutinize their feelings, they can no longer hold up their mask of self-assuredness; they suddenly are showing their weakness, their vulnerability, which often allows their partner to see them in a new light.

The two scripts always match

We can now put the two different scripts together. They match like pieces of a jig saw puzzle. And with this we are able to get the whole picture of the couple's fight. If we use the approach of visualizing the couple's fights with the help of the ping-pong game metaphor, they can learn a lot:

- First, Estelle and Ron become aware of the fact they both are engaged in that struggle, and that there is not a wrong-doer and not a victim.
- Second, they realize that the facts are irrelevant, but that the goal behind their fight is the wish to overpower and dominate their mate.
- Third, it's easy to see that each strike provokes a counter strike. They soon come to realize they are caught in an eternal struggle none of them will ever win, or rather, which both of them are inevitably bound to lose.

To obtain insight is encouraging

This method of conflict visualization, far from perpetuating each partner's negative view of the other and their interactions, provides encouragement, as each party can begin to see the relationship and the conflict more objectively. With this, the focus shifts from each individual's desire to get one over on the other; it becomes possible to see the futility of their struggle.

Ron and Estelle soon discovered that they could laugh at the game they were playing together. From this point on, at the beginning of the session, when they had to listen to what the other brought up, they felt more relaxed and less wound-up compared to the initial sessions. They calmed down; they knew their turn would come. This helped them to avoid resorting to an instant impulse to defend themselves.

And they loved filling in the ping pong scheme! It often happened like this: While I was-fetching the paper, they shouted: "Bring some more! We had a long fight! It went on and on." Thus, they were each helped to recognize their own share of the conflict. They learned to see the negative consequences of each other's aggression without being embarrassed.

Here we had reached the point where some crucial changes did occur.

After looking at an incident through the magnifying glass and after having worked out the dynamic of the emotions, each partner is asked:

In which way could you have acted differently, to make it easier for your mate?

At the beginning of therapy no client is able to answer this question. Their resistance would not allow it. Whether they say it out loud, or whether they just think it, their answer to my request will be: "Why should I help my partner? Why should I make changes? She/he was the one who misbehaved!"

But as soon as they realize that also their partner had been suffering during their fight, they start considering alternatives.

At first, when Ron wanted to prove what a good boy he was, he proposed: "I should have waited patiently until Estelle had finished her conversation with her mother." But because, at this point I was already familiar with his lifestyle, and knew that he is a person who needs very much to be in control. So, I understood that he would have felt like a martyr by not being certain of making it to the airport on time. I had to teach him, therefore, to become more aware of his own needs; he had to find a better solution, i.e. one which was respectful with Estelle's situation but allowed

him to meet his needs as well. And I was also not satisfied when Estelle declared: "I should have stopped talking to my mother as soon as Ron wanted me to leave." She would have felt she had behaved rudely towards her mother by giving in to her husband.

There is a very important additional point of conflict resolution, according to Rudolf Dreikurs (1972), which is: "Don't fight. Don't give in." Both partners must learn to react in a way which suits their personal needs. So, after some months of successful training, my clients were able to handle a similar situation in the following way:

Ron knocks at the door, opening it gently and says: "*Sorry to interrupt, but we should get ready soon.*" And Estelle answers: "*Thanks for reminding me. I won't take long.*"

Which means that by now they both are able to meet the needs of the situation: They are ready to communicate and to cooperate.

Conclusion

The case example described above was meant to illustrate an Adlerian approach to couples therapy and counseling. This is my way to train a couple to become more receptive and to learn more efficient ways of conflict resolution. I wanted to demonstrate how through a structured, and yet flexible, way of leading the dialogue, the counselor can facilitate and promote mutual understanding and receptiveness between partners in conflict.

Acknowledgements

This method derives from the knowledge of my teachers, who are not with us any more: Rudolf Dreikurs (1999), Bill Pew (Pew & Pew, 1997) and Erik Blumenthal (1988), all three of whom were outstanding Adlerian couples counselors. I have been working with their ideas throughout my professional career; I have been applying them to specific needs in various situations; and finally I have gained enough expertise and experience to develop my own method, which I hope might be useful to some of my colleagues who work with couples.

Bibliographic references

- Adler, A. (1929) *The science of living*, New York: Garden City Publishing.
- Adler, A. (1931). *What life should mean to you*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap.
- Adler, A. (1928/1982). Kurze Bemerkung über Vernunft, Intelligenz und Schwachsinn. In A. Adler, *Psychotherapie und Erziehung* (pp.224-231). Frankfurt: Fischer.
- Adler, A. (1938) *Social Interest: A challenge to mankind*, London: Faber & Faber Ltd.
- Blumenthal, E. (1988). *Verstehen und Verstanden werden: Die neue Art des Zusammenlebens* (5th ed.). Luzern: Rex.
- Carlson, J., Watts, R., & Maniaci, M. (2006). *Adlerian Therapy: Theory and practice*. APA.
- Dreikurs, R. (1972). Technology of conflict resolution. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 28(2), 203-206.

Dreikurs, R. (2013). *The challenge of marriage*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

Kopp, R. R. & Craw, M. J. (1998). Metaphoric language, metaphoric cognition, and cognitive therapy. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 35(3), 306. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0087795>

Pew, M. L. & Pew. W. L. (1997). Adlerian Marriage Counseling. In J. Carlson & S. Slavik (Eds.). *Techniques in Adlerian Psychology* (pp. 350–361). London: Taylor & Francis.