SHORT PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION ON PATHOLOGY BORDERS AND FIGHT FOR POWER: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract
This case study presents a psychotherapeutic intervention with a young married couple. The main complaints refer to communication difficulties, and the parents-in-law’s involvement in couple’s life. The systemic conceptualization reveals a borders’ pathology and individuals’ fight for power. The wife presents an ambivalence concerning the relation with her husband. In 13 months after the last session, the couple hadn’t had major communication’s difficulties; a meaningful change had been initiated in their life.

Keywords: clinical case study, systemic psychotherapy, borders, ambivalence

Introduction

The purpose of this case study is to describe the therapeutic interventions included in eight therapy sessions that stimulated change in a young couple. Its difficulties were caused by the beginning of a new life stage due to the baby’s arrival and parents’ involvement. The case draws attention to specific strategies that can be used when clinicians confront with a mixture of...
fight for power and fused borders in a family system. The presented case is successful due to the motivation of the partners to participate in therapy and the therapeutic relationship.

Main complaints

Răzvan and Ioana Vișan (26 and 24 years old) came together in therapy after Răzvan had already come alone in therapy on 28th of February. They are lawyers in training and have been married for one year and a half. Răzvan and Ioana have a little boy for one year-old. The clients live in a different city away from the therapist (200 km ride). Both are very angry on each other. They stated that their relationship had become worse: “We are arguing for no reason”. In the last period, when the young couple was fighting, the parents were involved. They arrived promptly at the children’s home and a huge conflict appeared where everybody was involved. The departure of Ioana with her child in her parent’s house had made things worse.

The therapist was contacted by Răzvan’s father, an ex-soldier and a father-in-law admired by Ioana: “My father-in-law picked you, so I trust him”. He was the one who made the appointment, but at the therapist’s proposal to call one member of the couple, the husband contacted the therapist one day later.

The couple gave examples that resemble with a continue fight for power: “Who is right?” or “Who is more stronger?” Also, complaints concerning sexual life arose, along with husband’s drinking. The baby was brought in discussion, in the sense that only Ioana’s parents spent time with him, but not Răzvan’s.

Personal and social history of the couple

Răzvan is the only child in his family and has a tense relationship with his father (51 years old) and a better communication with his mother (51 years old). Ioana is the older sister of a 20 years old brother. The couple has a good financial status. The husband works in his father’s company, and the wife has a personal business (see Figure 1). Both are from the same city. It was love at the first sight, although it was a moment when Răzvan wasn’t sure if he had wanted to continue this relationship. From the moment he found out that Ioana
was pregnant, till the moment she gave birth to their child, many unpleasant events took place in their life, along with diverse conflicts. These included doubts if the wedding should even take place. Răzvan believed that „a woman should follow her husband”, and consequently, he wanted that his future wife to move in his parent’s house. From the beginning, parents from both sides mangled in couple’s life. „They are very caring”, states Ioana about her parents and her parents-in-law.

Elements of clinical evaluation

Observations and interview

From a psychological point of view, Ioana presents an ambivalence concerning the relationship with her husband. On one hand she states that: “If the child wasn’t born, we wouldn’t have stayed together” which gives the initial impression that nothing unites them. On the other hand, in some other context, she states: “I wished Răzvan as my husband”, “When he is at work I miss him very much”. This shows a certain amount of uncertainty about their relationship. She describes herself as an anxious and depressed person: “I am
depressed, sad”, “I feel stressed, nervous”. Through the escalating stress technique, Ioana was asked if she had taken into account the possibility of a divorce. Her negative answer proves that she doesn’t really desire a definitive separation from Răzvan. Furthermore, there is a refusal to realize the first task proposed by the therapist, in which she had to describe how the perfect husband should behave. This suggests the fact that, in an unconsciously manner, Ioana is satisfied with the current situation and she doesn’t want to change anything. The therapy is, initially, disregarded. During therapy sessions, Ioana switches behavior and becomes active in realizing the tasks. By requesting an individual session, the patient proves an attempt to manipulate the therapist, saying that she isn’t capable of generating a positive change in their life.

Răzvan is described by her partner as a perfectionist person: „He is a perfectionist man”, being engaged in household chores. He is dominant and relatively traditionalist: ”The woman must follow her man”, attitude that maintains family conflicts. The doubt that Răzvan doesn’t take a sufficiently masculine position, determines him to impose himself in order to protect his wife. This emphasizes Ioana’s reactance; her autonomy’s tendencies being perceived as “castrating” by Răzvan, a vicious circle takes place (see Figure 2). The clients present a polite attitude in therapy, having an elegant appearance. They respect the topics proposed by the therapist and the therapy’s schedule.

**DSM-IV diagnosis**

1. **Axis I (clinical disorders):** the wife presents the signs of a subclinical depression, stating that she feels depressed and sad, but she doesn’t have the criteria of a major depressive episode coded as such. The husband has some elements of compulsive perfectionism, but this doesn’t affect significantly his life.

2. **Axis II (personality disorders):** there are no significant elements of a personality disorder, although Ioana presents histrionic tendencies.

3. **Axis III (general medical conditions):** no significant element to any client.

4. **Axis IV (psychosocial and environmental factors contributing to the disorder):** relational problems, familial stress, diffuse borders in families of origin, the birth of the baby as a stressful event of family cycle, excessive involvement of families of origin, alcohol.

5. **Axis V (Global Assessment of Functioning):** 6.10 Relational problems.
Case systemic conceptualization

From a systemic perspective, the objectives targeted the delimitation of the family’s borders, changing the pattern of beliefs and interactions between family members. The fight for power of both partners represents the principal cause of their problems. However, the status of elder sister of Ioana favors the position of dominance toward Răzvan. He presents himself, in the exercise entitled “The circles of Malarewicz” more like a son than a lover, brother or father. Răzvan is perceived by his wife in a significant measure as more of a father, which strengthens his representation of a protective person, but dominant at the same time.

The unplanned birth of Rareş produced stress in the family life cycle, including the transition from a couple without children to a couple with a child. The existence of Rareş changes the family dynamics. The two moved from the stage of unmarried adults to the stage of the family with a baby in a very short time. This short period was marked by numerous doubts and conflicts between the spouses. According to family life cycle theory, the transition from one stage to the next is a stress for family members because change requires renegotiation of the rules and creating new scenarios (Konya & Konya, 2012). Each stage involves the fulfillment of diverse family tasks. The rapid change in their lives didn’t give them the necessary time to adapt to the role of parents, generating conflicts and also the depressed and irritated mood of Ioana. Răzvan has imposed his masculinity by proposing Ioana to move to his parents’ home, believing that “a woman must follow her man”. The attitude of dominance could be inherited from his father, with whom he had a tense relationship. The marriage along with the child’s birth drew a involvement from their parents: “They are very caring”. They have become invasive and got involved in the majority of partners’ conflicts. The family’s borders became diffuse, almost erased. The fact that the couple still depends on the financial resources of the parents and Răzvan is working at his father’s company, leads to the reinforcement of this involvement. Moreover, the fact that the parents had the main role in the formalization of marriage: “The parents were trying to convince him to marry me when I got pregnant...” is the beginning of their involvement. The family borders are diffuse, characterized by the vague definition of the functions and the roles of members, privacy is minimal and the interaction between members is excessive. It is not clear who has the
responsibility and authority, the relationships between members being overlapped (Mitrofan & Vasile, 2001).

Răzvan’s concern of behaving like a “real man” leads him to believe that wife's family is overinvolved in the child’s life. One source of conflict is “Whose turn is to take the baby?”. Ioana has a clear ambivalence regarding her husband: “I turned away from him, it is like he is no longer the man of my dreams”, stating that the only thing that unites them is the child. However, in other contexts she admits she still loves Răzvan and misses him. Furthermore, the sexual life presents a particular importance for Ioana, the fact that: ”Sex has become boring”, has led to growing cold towards her husband. Both visions of the partners in the exercise of Malarewicz’s circles represent Ioana the desirable option as a mistress to a significantly greater extent than other roles. This gives Răzvan the doubt that he successfully fulfills the masculine role, leading to a dominant attitude towards Ioana.

According to the principles of systemic family therapy, the therapist adopted a position of neutrality towards both partners, who recognized at the end of therapy that "it was helpful that the therapist did not take sides." By adopting a neutral position towards change, an optimal context for change is created (Konya & Konya, 2012). The interaction between therapist and patients can be considered intimate because they share or co-create meanings and their actions are coordinated (Weingarten, 1991; Weingarten, 1992). However, the therapist was open to all possibilities regarding the future of the relationship, the prospect of divorce being considered by the technique of stress’s escalation.

**Therapy’s objectives**

The therapy’s objectives are: drawing clear borders in couple’s family, facilitating communication and negotiation the rules between the partners which will be written in a contract of the relationship.

**Steps in therapy**

Although, initially, we made no prediction concerning the therapy’s duration, the therapeutic team worked together over a period of eight meetings. These proved sufficient, from the patients’ point of view, in attaining the therapeutic goals.
First session (28th February 2012)

The first session started only with Răzvan who explained the therapist the difficulties in the relationship with his wife and the excessive involvement of the families of origin in their lives.

The 2nd session (4th of March 2012)

After first meeting Răzvan on February 28, the therapist held a second meeting with both parties on March 4. It was desired not to create the impression that the therapist is favoring the husband, whom he has previously seen. The session began with the request that each spouse would say what he loved about the other and what things work well in their relationship. The discussion slouched, especially from the part of Ioana and there were few positive attributes that the two were willing to mention. Because the complaints immediately followed, we discussed limitedly about them. Apart from mutual accusations about the behavior of the family, she accused him that he was stingy, she stayed home too much because she had to take care of the child and the sex had become boring. The spouses were given an ericksonian style homework, to come up with a notebook with red covers (instruction designed to arouse curiosity). Also in this session, the therapist asked what would behave the perfect husband / wife. Ioana stated that the perfect husband hugs her in the morning and tells her he loves her, prepares food, offers to do shopping, hugs again in front of the door, asks her about work, even by short text message, is interested about the baby, comes at noon with groceries and makes plans at lunch about how the couple will spend the night. For Răzvan, the perfect wife wakes up with him, makes him a sandwich at work. She says, when seeing each other at noon “How nice of you to come! How was your day?”, and tells him what she would like to do next. Homework for the next meeting was that they secretly think about a pleasant thing for the other partner, and to implement, without noticing each other, that thing. The task of each of them was to guess, at the end, what were the things that have been thought of and put into practice by the other partner.

The 3rd session (16th of March, 2012)

At the third meeting, on March 16, only the husband had done his homework. Ioana reasoned that she couldn’t think of anything special. The therapist explained to her that the task could contain simple things,
necessarily something important. It is essential that the partner should be pleased by that thing. It was the first indication of an attitude (apparently) shallow of Ioana regarding the therapy and also a possible attempt to manipulate the therapeutic context in the direction of the same struggle for power. In this session, negotiations on what everyone wants began. Ioana complained that she sat too much in the house and negotiated the possibility of hiring a nanny. Răzvan agreed and stated that he had never disagreed with this idea. Both partners brought into discussion their families and how they got involved in the couple’s family. The concept of “borders” was explained to them, on this occasion. The patients had found that no one is malicious, but that every family needed to put around clear boundaries. If there were no strict boundaries, none of the partners did not know what to expect, and the relationship became pathologic. It was pointed out that partners had no pathology, but the relationship itself is ill. It was determined that parents shouldn’t be notified of any fights of the couple. Regarding the child, parents' help was welcome but it was desirable for both partners to agree when to seek their aid. Concerning the red notebook ‘covers, the spouses received a typical ericksonian task: each of them would write on one side of the notebook his erotic fantasies. The notebook would never be seen by the therapist. It would stay in the spouses’ bedroom. It was forbidden that the partners look into what other was writing. Through this paradox prescription, it was intended for spouses to break the rules, to read each other’s’ fantasies, in order to communicate such desires without feeling pressured.

The 4th session (23th of March, 2012)

At the fourth meeting, on March 23, Ioana said that she felt depressed and sad, and she could not detach from painful things that had happened. “If it wasn’t our child, we would not stick together. And I feel relieved now that I said that. I want, but I cannot get over our past conflicts”. It was the moment when the therapist suspected an attempt of manipulation or that Ioana had already taken a decision. It was considered a good idea to schedule an individual meeting with Ioana. Furthermore, the idea that some couples may decide to divorce if this is what they desire was emphasized: therapy is not a guaranty of saving the relationship, but a framework in which the two partners can communicate openly and can negotiate rules. Through the technique of escalating stress which is specific to strategic interventions, the therapist asked
with a curious figure: “Have you considered the possibility of a divorce?” (Mitrofan & Vasile, 2001).

The 5th session (30th of March, 2012)

At the fifth meeting, only with Ioana, on March 30th, she pointed out: “I wanted to be with Răzvan. Parents were trying to convince him to marry me when I got pregnant”. Asked whether she had already taken a decision and wanted to separate from him, Ioana replied categorically that she hadn’t decided anything. The therapist explained Ioana that there was no other way for her to overcome past conflicts with her husband, unless she assumed this responsibility. If she could not do it, the only alternative is the divorce. Therapy cannot "remove" artificially something of a person's head. Using the escalating stress technique, the objective was to make Ioana more responsible, suggesting that if she continued to complain that "she couldn’t" surpass the difficulties, no one else would do it for her and the relationship would end.

The 6th session (6th of April, 2012)

At the sixth meeting, on April 6th, both spouses said that things were going better. The negotiations continued and the main theme was the autonomy of Ioana to take decisions. She was disturbed when her husband gave her unsolicited advice concerning her own business. They both agreed that, when Ioana would need help, she would ask for it. It was generally discussed how every person needed to feel useful, to take spontaneous decisions and to value the abilities possessed. Sometimes the good will of the husband to help his wife could become overwhelming. Through a functional analysis, the therapist explained the vicious circle in which spouses were sometimes: Răzvan’s doubts about his masculine identity and family leader materialize in attempts to help and protect Ioana, but also in attempts to dominate and to take the majority of decisions. This sends the message that Ioana is not capable to do things alone. Ioana responds by doubts about her own autonomy and personal value and also her ability to cope with this situation. She wants to be independent, to show her capability and therefore protests, complains or withdraws. All these effects are perceived by Răzvan as castrating, who believes that „he is led by his woman and therefore, he is not a real man”. This cycle repeats (see Figure 2).
Figure 2. Maintaining the symptom in the couple

*The 7th session (4th of May, 2012)*

At the seventh meeting on May 4th, the topics discussed were the common or separate cash funds. Each partner had the right to spend one amount of money mutually agreed, for personal pleasures, equal for each. On request, they both talked about the positive things that the other has done and also about three conflicts that occurred in the month they hadn’t seen the therapist. The spouses were informed that they would receive a draft contract relationship, which they would complete as they would negotiate. They would negotiate the rules and where it failed, the therapist would attend them the next meeting. Also, in the meeting were conducted the exercises of Malarewicz's circles on the roles of father / mother, brother / sister, son / daughter, lover / mistress (Malarewicz, 1992). The couple communicated thus the need for more erotism, but also for less dominance.
The 8th session (18th of May, 2012)

In last meeting on May 18th, the partners had come with their laptops, and together they read their version of the contract. In the contract were introduced things perceived by couple as appropriate or inappropriate and which could arouse jealousy and also the alcohol’s problem. Husbands were explained that the contract’s method is very good, but that they would not need to realise such documents their entire life. They would learn gradually to negotiate rules in family. Spouses did not continued therapy, claiming various activities that kept them busy, but they both considered that it was no longer needed.

Clients’ post therapy evolution and follow up

Thirteen months since the last session, the patients were contactated and stated that they were still together. No major conflicts had arisen and they rarely argued. Ioana believed that therapy saved them from divorce, while Razvan said that “it was an opening from both”. Both spouses declared that they were feeling “really good” and told spontaneously to the therapist: “You are very dear to us”. It helped them the most that the therapist did not take sides. Both families of origin are involved in a controlled manner in the couple’ family.

Limits

The main limitation is that the illustrative and exploratory value of this case study doesn’t allow for generalizations, like in the case of a quantitative systematic research. The purpose is to deductively reflect over the various explicative models used in conceptualizing this case, so they serve as a source for new hypothesis and alternative conceptualizations, to offer insights on the efficiency or inefficiency of certain techniques and to draw from some of the fine and idiosyncratic nuances that are particular to psychotherapy (Sava, 2003). Alternative conceptualizations, better explanations and intervention ideas can be proposed on this case and can be used in similar situations in psychotherapy.

Systematic future research can separate the various pairs of conceptualization-intervention with the purpose of testing the efficiency and
reliability of the therapeutic process. Moreover, controlled clinical trials can test not only the isolated efficiency of an intervention, like motivational or solution centered. They can also study the added effect that another conceptualization, like the systemic one as well as the associated intervention; these can be brought in for the benefit of the client.

Conclusions

The case of Răzvan and Ioana is a classic struggle of power, along with personal uncertainties and borders’ pathology. It draws attention to specific strategies that can be used when clinicians confront with a mixture of fight for power and fused borders in a family system. By proposing to delimitate borders, exercises of refocusing attention, open negotiation method (that valued their legal background), recognizing both sensitive points (the need to be perceived as male / need for recognition of independence), spouses had initiated cycle’s changes. The case is successful due to the patients’ motivation and the therapeutic relationship.

References


Appendix: The relationship’s contract

CONTRACT

Regarding the rights and the duties of the partners involved in a relationship of love and respect
Signed today 12.04.2012

1. Contracting Parties

IOANA VIŞAN, free person, full and equal partner, beneficiary of all rights under its adult status, hereinafter IOANA
and
RĂZVAN VIŞAN, full and equal partner, a free man, the beneficiary of all rights under its adult status, hereinafter RĂZVAN

2. The object of the contract

The object of the contract is the bilateral and irrevocable commitment to assume the responsibilities and rights arising from a relationship based on love and mutual respect. The purpose of the contract is the couple’s relationship indefinitely. The terms of the contract can be modified only by mutual agreement by addendum.

3. Duration of the contract

The contract is on unlimited duration but may end unilaterally notice. Unilateral termination of the contract entails the termination of the relationship.

4. Principles

Article 1. The terms of this contract shall be in the spirit of principles supported and recognized as such by both partners. These principles represent a set of common values;
Article 2. Both partners recognize the individual freedom of the other, the spirit and the respect of other principles, rights and obligations set out in this agreement;
Article 3. Both partners recognize sexual fidelity and closed couple relationship as the only viable option for coexistence in two;
Article 4. Both partners recognize each exclusive right over their money and valuables, except funds and amounts recognized as being common and managed in that way;
Article 5. Both partners recognize the value of truth and transparency in the relationship;
Article 6. Both partners recognize the importance of respect for self and other;
Article 7. Both partners recognize the function of mutual support, moral and financial of the couple;
Article 8. Both partners declare their intention to make this relationship a permanent link during the entire life.
5. Obligations of the parties

5.1 Common Obligations

5.1.1 Couple communication
Article 9. Both partners have the right to express their feelings in the couple;
Article 10. Each partner is entitled to have an unlimited number of discussions on the couple’s relationship, held with the other partner;
Article 11. Discussions will respect the principle of alternative expression (no one talks over the other, each partner finishing what he said);
Article 12. Bad language is not allowed;
Article 13. Gestures of disrespect are not allowed. They include slamming the door in the nose or jostling each other;
Article 14. Each partner is entitled to an answer to a question from the other.

5.1.2 Chores
Article 15. Both partners recognize their common responsibility equally for household work and to clean the house;
Article 16. Distribution of the cleaning activities is as follows:
   a). IOANA has to wash the dishes, do the laundry and dusting;
   b). RĂZVAN has to use vacuum weekly, to take out the trash and clean the windows.

5.1.3 Money and values
Article 17. Accounts and fees of the partners are separated, representing individually each property;
Article 18. The house is, in fact, throughout the relationship, both partners’ property and may be labelled with the phrase “our home”;
Article 19. Each partner reserves the right to pay, whenever he wants, for goods or services enjoyed by the other. These payments are for gifts and do not remain falling due under any circumstances between partners;
Article 20. The debts between the two partners are repaid on mutually agreement;
Article 21. Either of the partners reserves the right to cancel the debts that the other has to him if and when desired.

5.1.4 Sexual fidelity
Article 22. Partners engage in complete sexual fidelity during the relationship.

5.1.5 Communicating with people from outside the dyad
Article 23. IOANA and RĂZVAN recognize the value of friendships or communication with other people.

5.1.6 Sleep
Article 24. Both partners recognize that they are different from a psychological and physiological point of view;
Article 25. Both partners must respect the other’s silence when he sleeps. This includes closing the doors gently and silent movements.

5.2 Strictly personal psychological space
Article 26. Both partners recognize the need for everyone to have a strictly personal psychological space, access being limited only to that person;
Article 27. For IOANA, personal space is represented by the e-mail account, mobile phone and purse;
Article 28. For RĂZVAN, personal space is represented by the e-mail account and cell phone;
Article 29. In all other personal effects, both partners have mutual access;  
Article 30. Storage (hard- disk computers, external sites, DVDs and CDs) are not part of personal psychological space.

5.3 **Obligations of RĂZVAN**  
Article 31. To respect IOANA;  
Article 32. To listen IOANA without interrupting her;  
Article 33. To maintain confidentiality;  
Article 34. To keep confidential the information about the couple except for the loved ones;  
Article 35. To respect the stipulations of this contract.

5.4 **Obligations of IOANA**  
Article 36. To respect RĂZVAN;  
Article 37. To listen RĂZVAN without interrupting him;  
Article 38. To keep confidential the information about the couple except for the loved ones.

6. **The rights of the parties**

Article 39. Parties have the right of communication, respect and mutual support.

7. **The 10-day clause**

Article 40. In the case of an unilateral or bilateral decision of divorce, the 10-day clause will enter in force;  
Article 41. The 10-day clause requires both partners not to take irreversible decisions within 10-day of the decision to separate;  
Article 42. Irreversible decisions include moving definitively from the location, sex with other people or leaving abroad;  
Article 43. Once active, the 10-day clause cannot be suspended even by consent;  
Article 44. The 10-day clause can enable both partners to reverse their decision to split up;  
Article 45. Once expired the 10-day clause, IOANA and RĂZVAN can implement any decisions taken.

Equal partner,  
IOANA VIŞAN  
Equal partner,  
RĂZVAN VIŞAN

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