

Meaning in couples relationships

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Based on psycholinguistics and L. Vygotsky's (2007) theories on sign, meaning and sense categories, as later discussed by A. Leontiev (2004, 2009), we present a case study that focuses on the intricacies of a love relationship for a woman who remained in a painful marriage. Interview material is presented in a Relational-Historical Psychology theoretical framework to provide central categories of meaning and sense. This is understood as a privileged method for apprehending the uniqueness of a human being. To segment the qualitative material, we used the "Analysis of the Nuclei of Meanings for the Apprehension of the Constitution of Sense," by Aguiar and Ozella (2006, 2013). This approach seeks to discriminate the meanings and senses that constitute the content of a speech sample.

Keywords: meaning, sense, core meaning, activity, love, relationship

Introduction

This research project studies the relationship between adult humans, an artificial historical product, which mediates a unique and singular relationship between human adults — marriage.

A case study details a woman's subjective experience of remaining in a prolonged marriage that has caused continued suffering.

A semi-structured interview was used to collect data, and an "Analysis of the Nuclei of Meaning for the Apprehension of the Constitution of Sense" by Aguiar and Ozella (2006, 2013), segmented and deepened the qualitative material. This method applies a Relational-Historical Psychology theoretical framework, which is a privileged method for apprehending the uniqueness of a human being.

Concept of family and marriage

History has recorded various forms of relationships between humans, which has led to the emergence of new, metamorphosed intimate relationship formats.

Engels (2012) notes that historical artifacts are a common inheritance of humanity that provide a perspective on the past and lead towards understanding

progress over the course of time. Historical artifacts also demonstrate that phases of development run parallel to the invention of new subsistence and labor instruments.

The democratization of personal relationships profoundly affected marriage relationships (Giddens, 1993). Modern marriages correspond to an epoch of crisis, that is, transformation, because they incorporate historical characteristics based on socioeconomic contracts between families and newer perspectives on relationships. In the modern sentimental marriage, passion is the motivation for an alliance.

Marriage now finds its origin and reason in love. Society's development opened new possibilities for expanding consciousness and psychological development. In marriage, the individual and couple's projects are shared, and sex is a permanent indicator that maintains the relationship. Psychological marriage implies that temperament and personality are compatible and only accessible if two people are living together in a marriage. As such, intimacy becomes structured on new values, which no longer include only friendship and love but also sex (Aires, 2007).

Meanings in the relationship between couples

Love embodies a conscious choice and provides personal fulfillment. However, the decision-making process is not natural or direct. It is necessary for society to develop and address several historical products (such as divorce and marriage for love) for these to become options. One should not conclude that culture provides an answer, but that it can make different choices available. Therefore, society needs to understand different historical products that act as alternatives, to develop a competency that implies will.

Reality should be made clear for a person may deal with a problem, but it is equally necessary that culture makes alternatives available, thus opening the possibility for choosing one of many ways of life. For example, divorce (as a love marriage) is a recent historical product in the progress of mankind. Divorce legalization was a step forward in Portugal, and it is now a less socially condemned option.

Language is the gateway for socio-cultural heritage, and it channels an understanding of the present human world. Thus, studying expressed meanings and senses allows us to grasp the human essence. Language is the psychological tool that allows access to consciousness.

Method

The research project — the interview method

This qualitative research project used a semi-structured interview that was contextualized as a dialogue. This method demonstrated the socio-historical perspective in qualitative research. Reliability was obtained through associative exchanges and interactions. Therefore, in the interview, consistency was the discourse experience between the interviewee and the researcher (Bakhtin, 1992).

In the interview, the subject expresses oneself, but what he articulates reflects the culture in which he is immersed, revealing his socio-historical reality.

The goal of qualitative data analysis is to understand the implicit sense of linguistic production (Freitas, 2002; Aguiar and Ozella, 2006, 2013).

Interviews provide access to meanings and senses because they provide a structured space in which individuals may construct reciprocal and alternating implications (Freitas, 2002; Aguiar and Ozella, 2006, 2013).

Instrument: Core meaning analysis

Discourse analysis provides access to the implicit and explicit substance in the interview. According to Aguiar and Ozella (2006, 2013), the core meaning should reflect the empirical facts and also signal the subject's inner hidden discourse, including his thoughts, the process of meaning construction, or in the present case, the subject's understanding of marriage.

Elements of the discourse as pre-markers

The material transcribed from the audio-recordings was attentively and repeatedly re-read to construct pre-markers. Each time the interviews were reviewed, recurring and highly valued content were highlights, as they revealed a greater emotional charge or ambivalence. The pre-markers provide a range of possibilities for further specifying core meanings.

Markers

The next step in the analysis process is to assemble the pre-markers in constitute markers. Similarity, complementarity and opposition are the criteria for aggregation. Indicators are not static, but are dynamic because they depend on the context in which they are initiated. For example, the life course phases or stages, the types of relationships established, professional experiences, etc. (Aguiar and Ozella, 2006, 2013).

Markers only acquire meaning because they are inserted and intimately associated with a global thematic content as envisioned by the subject in the moment.

Construction of the nuclei of core meanings

This phase initiates, "...a process of articulation of nuclei of signification through the act of naming" (Aguiar and Ozella, 2006, 2013).

Transformations and contradictions are unraveled through this process. This is an analytical approach of the subject's perception because it moves beyond what is evident and circumscribes *mediators* that provide access to the individual. Thus, one becomes closer to sense formations. The nuclei of core meanings expresses fundamental constitutive determinants of the individual and his emotional dynamics.

Thus, six cores of meaning were inferred from the interviews and were systematized, with respect to love relationships in adult life. They were applied to a descriptions of a subject who belonged to a group of women who remained in long-standing, unhappy marriages.

Case study

We named the case: "Solange, an Unhappy Marriage." The name is fictitious but all other data are real. The interviewee provided consent to use the data for the case study. Solange is 44 years old, had been married for 22 years, and has three children who are 16, 14 and 4 years old.

Organization of pre-markers and markers

Pre-markers were structured according to the similarity, complementarity or opposite-position criteria, as proposed by Aguiar and Ozella (2006, 2013). Markers are congregated from the narrative, agglutinating several themes that were found in the subject’s description that inferred systematic indicators.

The process of isolating nucleus III is presented below to demonstrate the organization process:

Table 1

Pre — Markers	Markers	
4. Husband betrays her with lovers.	a) Experience of being betrayed.	
5. Husband betrays her with sex professionals		
6. Husband frequently uses websites for encounters.		
7. Husband has mobile telephones to organize his extra marital encounters.		
8. Uncommon preoccupation with physical appearance and husband’s sexual distance.		
9. Has been betrayed for 18 years.		
10. She undervalues his infidelities.		
11. The husband undervalues his infidelities.		
12. He is opposed to divorce.		
13. Husband’s existing professional absences.		
14. Her pregnancies are desired by husband despite his infidelity.		
15. She feels that she was never resigned to the situation.		
16. He has an emotional problem.		b) Does not accuse husband of being irresponsible.
17. He does not accept therapeutic help.		
18. Friends believe that something strange can explain the husband’s behavior.		
19. The husband’s childhood problems.		
20. Prostitutes seduce him.		
21. He speaks of himself as having the vice of sex.		
22. Men have a gene that leads to betrayal.		
23. Absence of physical violence.		
24. Recognizes the value of understanding and freedom that the husband gives her.		
25. Recognizes value of the role of father.		
26. Recognizes value of the good social status of the couple.		
27. Over-valuation of the project of constructing a building for the home.		
60. Her marriage has positive sides.	j) Preserve marriage.	
61. She tries not to look for indications of infidelities.		
62. She has an almost perfect family except for infidelities.		
63. She has already tried couple and individual therapy, but he abandoned it.		
64. She hoped that, after each discussion, things would change.		
65. She has looked up sex professionals trying to understand what in them is more attractive than in herself.		
66. She recognizes the values of her marriage compared to others.		
67. She is afraid of becoming intolerant of her husband.		
68. She still maintains hope in her marriage		
69. Her husband constantly incentivizes her to participate in his athletic activities and sport.		

Pre — Markers	Markers
70. Suffering for the children.	k) Fear of consequences of divorce.
71. Sorrow for the “in-laws”.	
72. Divorce destroys the family.	
73. Feeling of loss of an almost perfect family vs infidelities.	
74. Fear of taking care of children alone.	
75. Fear of lacking help if the children are ill.	
76. Fear of not being able to maintain the same financial comfort.	
77. Fear of never finding a new companion who will love her.	
78. Friends counsel her not to make hasty decisions.	l) Does not consider herself responsible for decisions in respect to her own life.
79. Fear of an abrupt decision.	
80. The husband must decide because it is he who is at fault.	
81. Example of divorce suffered by sister in law.	m) Negative and restricted vision of divorce.
82. Children suffer when stepmothers enter the scene.	
83. Her children suffered when their aunt became divorced.	
84. Divorce does not only affect the couple, but the entire family.	
85. Divorce represents an abrupt rift in life.	
86. Divorce evidences failure of life project.	
87. All of her friends are married.	
88. Examples of persons who regretted having divorced.	

Organizing markers

This level of analysis borders sense formation, that is, in the present case, it permits an understanding of the interviewee’s lived experience of marriage. Articulating different meanings through organizing the markers resulted in inferences and constructions, which led to the nuclei of meanings formulation:

- I. Lack of personal project.
- II. Not responsible for decisions regarding her own life/fear of the future.
- III. Contradictions and an ambiguous sense of being married and betrayed.
- IV. Confusion between parenting and marital status
- V. Confrontation with her own marital state
- VI. (In) Decision relative to divorce

After the nuclei of meaning have been adequately organized, it is followed by an analysis of inter- and intra-nuclei (Aguiar; Ozella, 2006, 2013). Of these nuclei, nucleus III was chosen as an example of how the subsequent analyses were conducted:

Table 2

Markers	Nucleus of Meaning
b) Experience of being betrayed	III. Contradictions and ambiguities between being married and being betrayed
j) Preservation of marriage.	
k) Fear of consequences of divorce	
l) Does not consider herself responsible for decisions in respect to her own life.	
m) Envisages divorce as negative and limited.	

Internuclear and internuclei analyses

III. Contradictions and ambiguities of being married and betrayed

b) The experience of being betrayed

Let's say that the positive aspects of our relationship have weighed the most, though some may find this strange, because because there is the question of betrayal over time

***The first time I was betrayed**, looking back today, I feel as if it were an almost non-significant episode: we had been married three to four years.*

*During the years, **a few episodes of infidelity** occurred...*

*Then, **these occurred anew**. During those episodes, he always made efforts to charm me.*

Bratus (2005, 2005a) clarifies that sense formations are not always available to conscious verbalization. However, in the context of the relationship with another person, the interviewee will envision the scenario of her experience: she has been betrayed for 18 years.

To disentangle the sense implies the intuition of double senses. It is crucial to note what the subject says and also her behaviors because because the sense formation cannot be independently discriminated from the action process. According to Leontiev,

“studying the individual psyche, it is the analysis of the activity of individuals in given social conditions and concrete circumstances that are the lot of each of them.”

(2009, p.42)

III. Contradictions and ambiguities of being married and betrayed

j) Preserving marriage

*“... **completely distant, repeated sexual distance, you're always tired (...)** you never want to be with me.”*

*“Because he says I am the woman of his life. And I myself, as time goes by, **our involvement**, our friendship because I have **a very beautiful family life, not counting these aspects...**”*

This woman does not make a decision because she does not integrate two contradictory pieces of information: the physical and emotional absence of her husband and her perception that there is still involvement between the couple:

However, because she has established a relationship with the interviewer (a woman), there are moments in which the double sense comes through (Bakhtin, 1992). Both facets of experience become integrated in that moment, and the interviewee clarifies for herself and the other how she experiences the betrayals:

III. Contradictions and ambiguities of being married and betrayed

b) The experience of being betrayed

Interviewee “(...) if I were able to isolate this problem because it **does not affect me very much at this moment ...**”

Interviewer: “Does not affect you anymore?”

Interviewee: “It does! It does! **It affects me a lot!** Because the situation has come in cycles, shorter each time (...) Up to the moment, these last years it has been difficult to bear.”

The interviewee demonstrates how she manages her life, which is reflected in the popular social saying: “*He goes around with others, but he loves me.*” The inheritance of the *stoic* moral philosophy is shown in the following verbalizations:

III. Contradictions and ambiguities of being married and betrayed

b) The experience of being betrayed

<p><i>“That was it, that is what hurts, when I perceived that there existed various contacts (...) with Brazilians mixed in, this becomes a serious question! (... laughs!)”</i></p>	<p><i>“... he confounds me when he says I am present here, this is where I eat, this is where I come, these are my things and everything that is my home, my work. We have many things in common ... It is difficult to separate myself from him because of all these things.”</i></p>
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Social meanings sustain personal senses and support the psychological construction of this woman’s life, while questioning her way of living. The meanings are the most important originators of conscience, and they confront her with other’s worlds, which may not match her subjective world. When confronted with different meanings, this woman is affected by her reality. In this case, the guidelines she builds for her orientation become crushed.

We demonstrate an inter-nuclear analysis and present core V, followed by cores II, IV, and back to illustrate this confrontation:

V. Confronting personal marital life states

f) Negative external opinions on her marriage

“In respect to this situation, my daughter is more ... she thinks I forgive too much. She thinks I should already have been more radical with what shows up. I always say to her that I am waiting (laughs) for things to become different.”

The interviewee laughs because motives “are not separated from conscience“... *Even when motives are not recognized, that is when the person does not apprehend what makes him do one thing instead of another, acts still retain a psychic reflection, but in a specific format — the form of emotional coloring of action*” (Leontiev, 2009, p. 168). The act of laughing demonstrates this reasoning’s fragility in the hope that has endured for 18 years.

The interviewee continues and reveals that it is difficult to integrate this painful information, so a different social meaning appears to support the decision to maintain the marriage: that “*you never abandon a sick person.*” This social meaning is presented in nucleus II:

II. Personal responsibility / Fear of the future

c) Does not accuse husband of being irresponsible

“... it is equally difficult for me to separate from him at this moment because I feel he is not well. I feel I am dealing with a person who has a problem, or is personally unbalanced ...”

Motives mediate the act. According to Leontiev (2009), human activity is multi-motivational that simultaneously responds to two or more reasons that are either

oriented to society or geared towards oneself. Thus, in accord with Bratus (2005), we cannot analyze personal sense in isolation, but only the sense-based formations that are connected to activity, which are more general and universal and belong to a whole. Consequently, everything becomes worth preserving in a person's marriage, even a motivation that accommodates syncretism between parenting and marital relationships.

To illustrate this, an excerpt that presents the basis of nucleus IV. is presented below:

IV. Confusion between parenting and marital status

e) The experience of being a parent

“My brother-in-law’s divorce is an example of what I don’t want for my own life. (...) Because it is children who are divided, sent from one side to the other living with unexpected people, the youngsters suffer in the process. It is perceiving my children’s suffering ...”

Making sense only exists in the movement of acting on reality, the world of people, things and events. Solange defends marriage in her initial interview, however; linguistic expression was still on a superficial level. After relational engagement materializes between the interviewee and interviewer, we are able to access an authentic internal response:

III. Contradictions/ambiguities between marriage and betrayal

k) Fear and consequences of divorce

Interviewer: *“As of today, what is your feeling for your husband?”*

<p><i>“At the moment, I cannot exactly say. I believe I have love as I would have for a friend ... That feeling of respect of woman to man, which I would like to feel for him, has evaporated because he constantly disillusions me — do you follow me?”</i></p>	<p><i>“But to leave a marriage searching for a new relationship and to expect very special things of other situations: which may happen or not. I don’t know what is really better or not — because I don’t feel myself. I am still examining my marriage and trying to have my family, together, convincing my husband to accept help.”</i></p>
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It is not difficult to implant falsehoods in speech; however, it is difficult to do this in acts, especially when they are repeated, because one is experiencing an internal, authentic response. In the above verbal description, Solange expresses losing feelings of respect that should be complemented by friendship in couple's relationships. She also describes her fear related to risking a new relationship.

In the relationship built by this couple, it made sense to preserve a distorted relationship with the world. This relationship is stronger than what they had intended or could comprehend.

This woman presents an uncertain form of conscience because she does not integrate the two contradictory information types — each are equally valued when they appear. She is able to proceed with new information as if no former information existed. The next excerpt demonstrates this as she confronts her marital experience.

V. Confrontation with her marital experience
h) Ambiguous feelings of the husband for his wife

“He feels very much when I am absent. Now, I don’t know. I don’t know. I think that when F. doesn’t respect me it seems he doesn’t love me., you see.”

“But when he perceives that I might leave, he seems to like that, but I feel he will suffer very much, I understand he is very hurt.”

Conclusion

Turning sense into meaning is a profoundly intimate and psychologically meaningful process. Because meanings take place in a personal conscience, they are movements that provide consistent significations for the subject in the current situation.

Given these considerations, personal meanings, which reflect motives created as relational actions of humans, may not adequately incorporate the objective meanings of the concrete subject (Leontiev, 2009).

The way this woman perceives the phenomena of her reality –marriage, merely results from the assimilation of ready-made external, meanings, i.e., stereotypes. This makes it possible to introduce representations and distorted ideas or fantasies into her conscience at any moment, including ones that are not based on her concrete, practical experience of reality (Leontiev, 2009).

Restructuring personal meanings into more appropriate narratives is possible with reconciliation (negotiation) between social representation and personal sense, allowing a new sense to emerge from conflict. Conscious meaning (subjective sense) is not an individual consciousness as opposed to social consciousness, but it is my social conscience. Hence, there is a need to have healthy friends who share ones understanding of oneself, others and the world. This sharing generates a conflict between visions and ways of being that motivates the emergence of new motifs that give birth to new senses.

Final reflection

The case and analysis presented here illustrates a method for applying the Relational-Historical Psychology theoretical framework to apprehend the uniqueness of a human through a process of discriminating meanings and senses, which constitute the content of a speech sample.

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