

Negotiating Open and Hidden Power Struggles in Couples Counseling¹

By Yvonne Schurer, Switzerland

Having worked with couples in conflict for over 35 years now, I have become quite an expert when it comes to power struggles. I am not unlike one of those dogs at the airports, which sniff around for drugs in the unsuspecting travelers' baggage. That is, I believe I am able to detect power struggles in any area of a couple's daily life. And I am equipped with some tools I use to deal with this phenomenon. One of those tools I am going to present here is a method, which helps reveal open and hidden strategies employed by partners in conflict.

I know it is not new and I am not trying to re-invent the wheel, so to speak. The method is based on knowledge of my teachers, who are not with us any more: Rudolf Dreikurs, Bill Pew and Erik Blumenthal, who were outstanding couples counselors, all three of them. 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 will be useful to some of my colleagues, who work with couples.

Couples counseling, as we all know, is not an easy task, for many reasons. Perhaps, the greatest obstacle we face here is the fact our clients mostly pursue somewhat ambivalent goals: ON the one hand they want to improve their relationship with their partner, but on the other hand they want to win their fight against them. They have come to a point where they believe their

¹ A Speech given at the 23rd Congress of the International Association of Individual Psychology, Torino, Italy May 26 – 29, 2005 and published in Florida Adlerian Society Newsletter, July/August/September 2005

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

partner no longer understands them, and that their living together has lost much of its former quality. They had other ideas of a marriage, of a partnership. 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 had the best of intentions. But with the years they had been getting themselves entangled in ever-aggravating problems and by the time they are coming to see us they feel completely lost, not knowing which way to turn. Therefore, in most of the cases, our first job or task will be to rearrange things, to bring some light into the chaos.

When it comes to conflict resolution, according to Rudolf Dreikurs 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 at a distance, as if they were to assume a position of a detached observer. Their first step would be learning to observe what is going on. Our clients have already made their observations, you bet, and both of them are more than ready to give their counselor a good briefing. Counseling, therefore, is sometimes similar to the task of solving of those well-known riddles in children’s magazines: You see two pictures, which seem identical, but there are 10 differences, and you must find all of them.

Dreikurs compared the information we get from both partners with the script of a theater play: Each client can tell us only half of the script, because he does not remember his own part. But he remembers well what the other said and what the other did.

The wife tells us: Suddenly he came storming into the kitchen shouting: “Could you stop talking to your mother and get your thing ready?” I tried to ignore his aggressive tone, but he

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

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.”

The husband tells us: 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 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, when our clients have as Adler would put it, such a biased apperception”? Both claim to be the victim of their partner’s aggressive behavior and they are convinced that they, themselves, had 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 2 stories separately without comparing one to 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 the victim’s experience, on the way he/she felt, and how he/she was dealing with the facts.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

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, which the other is telling. This means they have to listen to the representation of their 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 I do fail.

But once I 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 “to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another to feel with the heart of another.” 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, too, must be able to see their goal behind their conflict. Here, now, the counselor can be of a great help to the couple: He has the advantage of knowledge. Thanks to psychological models, the Adlerian model for example, he is able to build a professional hypothesis about the discouraging dynamics, which are at work in his clients’ partnership.

And now, how, can the counselor transfer his way to look at things, his suppositions to his clients? I think that many of you must already have been familiar with the counseling technique

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

of applying the metaphor of a ping-pong game to the situation – that is to a couple’s power struggle.

It is the Ping-Pong Effect. I personally have found visualizing the ping pong effect extremely helpful. For this purpose I have created a handout that is easy to understand and which forms the basis of my work with couples. Visualization is a great help to them when it comes to understanding the ups and downs of their daily fights. At the heart of the idea lies actually the Adler’s model of the individual striving for superiority.

Let me show you how I explain it to my clients, who mostly have no profound knowledge of psychology: 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 being” 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 they can’t endure to be left out. They need to belong somewhere – i.e. to their social environment.

As soon as their internal alarm goes off, sending out a message “You are out!” their inferiority feeling urge them to compensate for their unfavorable situation. The mechanism that is responsible for this strife toward 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 worthiness.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

Unfortunately, individuals rarely achieve their goal to get the feeling of belonging, of embedment back. It is out of fear that the individual tends to exaggerate his upward movement and is striving for superiority.

As far as couples are concerned this applies to both partners: As long as both are feeling equal there is no need for couple counseling. The trouble starts as soon as one of them begins feeling inferior. 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. It's the emotions that count. These emotions are urging them to get even. And from that moment on a friendly exchange is no more possible; the harmony is broken. This is generally the moment when they start using their power as a weapon against their partner. The easiest way to get on top will be to push the partner down.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com