

PUBLIC SELECTION BASED ON QUALIFICATIONS AND INTERVIEW FOR THE AWARDING OF NO. 1 GRANTS LASTING 12 MONTHS FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN ACCORDANCE WITH ART. 22 OF LAW OF 30.12.2010 NO. 240 AT THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BERGAMO (ACADEMIC RECRUITMENT FIELD 11/E4 – CLINICAL AND DYNAMIC PSYCHOLOGY - ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE M-PSI/08 – CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY - AS PART OF THE PLAN FOR EXTRAORDINARY RESEARCH CALLED ITALY® (TALENTED YOUNG ITALIAN ® RESEARCHERS) - YOUTH IN RESEARCH INITIATIVE FOR THE YEAR 2016 – TYPE D – CUP: F12I14000230008

announced with decree of the Rector Rep. no. 567/2016 of 8.11.2016 and posted on the official registry of the University on 8.11.2016

RESEARCH PROJECT

"Semantic cohesion in mono-cultural and intercultural couples"

1. Construing meaning within couples

The construction of a marital couple is linked to a great individual change, as in many cultures the new union modifies the life of each partner, often irreversibly. Even the meanings could change. During the course of our personal story, along with the members of our family, we have developed particular semantic patterns nourished by specific emotions:

"Falling in love and the forming of a partnership are a challenge to these well-established semantic patterns at the root of our identity, but also a great opportunity for widening our meanings (...) Forming a couple signifies renegotiating personal meanings with the partner. The couple's life together starts by the meeting of two worlds of different meanings, the result of previous co-positionings" (Ugazio & Fellin, 2016, p.128).

These two worlds must find a co-position, otherwise the couple has a short life.

Ugazio and Fellin (2016) maintain that the inevitable process of restructuring of meanings is studded with emotional destabilizing moments, similar to the enigmatic episodes described by Ugazio (1998, 2012/2013). These moments could lead to a breakup of the couple, or could trigger new semantic games.

The aim of this explorative study is to operationalize a new construct: the couple semantic cohesion. The relations between semantic cohesion and other features of marital dynamics, such as marital satisfaction, will be explored.

2. Semantic cohesion: an operational definition

The concept of cohesion (togetherness) has been presented in the couple and family literature by Olson (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russle, 1979; Maynard & Olson, 1987; Olson, 2000; Olson & Gorall, 2003). Along with flexibility and communication, cohesion is one of the three dimensions for assessing family and marital functioning, according to Olson's Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russle, 1979; Maynard & Olson, 1987; Olson, 2000; Olson & Gorall, 2003). Cohesion, as flexibility, is a variable with normal distribution: the central or balanced levels are the most functional.

Family cohesion is defined as "the emotional bonding that couples and family members have towards one another" (Olson & Gorall, 2003, p.516) and "focus on how systems balance separateness versus togetherness" (ibidem).

Olson's concept of cohesion has some similarities with other constructs as Minuchin's boundaries (Minuchin, 1974) Bowen's "I/we" positions (Bowen, 1966), Boszormeny-Nagy's (1973) idea of "a balance between give and take".

The model allows the identification of four levels of cohesion: two unbalanced (disengaged and enmeshed), two balanced (separated and connected). Balanced couple and family systems "tend to be more functional across the life-cycle" (Olson, 2000, p.147). Separated and connected relationships are characterized by a balance between separateness and togetherness. Although time apart is more important, in the separated relationship "there is some time together, some joint decision-making and marital support" (ibidem). In the connected relationship "time together is more important than time alone" but there are also separate friends and activities (ibidem).

Families with very low cohesion are formed by members who don't think themselves as a family system: each member knows little about the others, they do their own things, they have separate time and space. Also disengaged relationships are characterized by the difficulty in functionally managing the I/we relation: "a disengaged relationship often has extreme emotional separateness" (ibidem). Instead, in families with very high cohesion, individuals are "very dependent on each other and reactive to one another. There is a lack of personal separateness and little private space

is permitted" (ibidem). Enmeshed relationships are characterized by an "extreme amount of emotional closeness" (ibidem).

Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluations Scales (FACES II, Olson, Portner & Bell, 1982; FACES III, Olson, Portner & Lavee, 1985; FACES IV, Olson & Barnes, 2004) is a self-report instrument that assesses the cohesion dimension. The last version, FACES IV (Olson & Barnes, 2004), is composed of six scales (two balanced and four unbalanced) of seven items each, plus the Family Communication Scale and the Family Satisfaction Scale of ten items each.

The concept of couple semantic cohesion is also about togetherness, but it focuses on only the construction of meanings. Developed in the framework of Ugazio's (1998; 2012/2013) semantic polarity theory, the concept of semantic cohesion is defined as the degree to which partners share their meanings during the conversation. The operational definition of semantic cohesion is the proportion of semantic polarities belonging to the same semantic, shared by each couple compared to the total number of semantic polarities created during the conversation by each couple.

By semantic we mean (Ugazio, Negri, & Fellin, 2009) a coherent group of semantic polarities nourished by the same emotions, including the four semantics put forward by the semantic polarity theory (Ugazio, 1998, 2012/2013): freedom, goodness, power and belonging. These semantics prevail in family conversations in which a person could develop a phobic (semantic of freedom), an obsessive-compulsive (semantic of goodness), an eating (semantic of power) or a depressive disorder (semantic of belonging) (Ugazio, Negri, & Fellin, 2015). They can dominate also within families where any member develops a psychopathology; according to Ugazio, what matters for the onset of a psychopathology is the position assumed by partners during conversation within the dominant semantic.

There are two kinds of semantic cohesion. The narrated semantic cohesion is the degree to which the couple share the same verbal meanings during the conversation; the interactive semantic cohesion is the degree to which the couple share the same meanings extracted from the partners' mutual positioning, expressed mainly by nonverbal communication.

This definition gives the opportunity to differentiate the contribution of each partner in building the semantic cohesion. It is possible to identify the prevailing semantic of each member of the couple and verify his/her ability to enter in the partner's dominant semantic. It is also possible to verify in which semantic pole each partner positions him/herself and the others.

Couples could find different forms of semantic cohesion, summarized in the following five sub-types:

Semantic Assimilation. A partner's semantic becomes the dominant world for the couple.

Semantic Sharing. The couple shares the same dominant semantic, presumably since before they have met.

Semantic Bidirectional Exchange. Each partner keeps his own prevailing semantic but is able to enter into the other's semantic.

Semantic Togetherness. The couple creates a "semantic togetherness" in which it is not possible to track down couples conversations in which the dominant semantic of one partner emerges. When the couple is together a new semantic world emerged, different from the two original semantics.

Semantic Separation. The couple doesn't create a shared semantic plot. Each partner uses his/her own prevailing semantic, developed in previous belongings, unable to enter in the partner's meanings..

3. Aim

The aim of this explorative study is to analyze the independent variable semantic cohesion, as it emerges from the semantic exchange within couple sessions/interviews and in individual sessions/interviews where each partner talks with the therapist/researcher without the presence of the other partner.

The main questions, to which the study intend to answer, are the following:

Which semantic does each partner use in the conversation during the individual sessions/interviews? Is this the same semantic each uses in the couple sessions/interviews?

To what extent does each partner share the dominant semantic of the other?

Does the partner semantic change when they are talking about themselves as a couple or about their family of origin or their contexts outside the couple's life?

The relations between semantic cohesion and enigmatic episodes and between semantic cohesion and "marital satisfaction/dissatisfaction" will also be investigated.

The hypotheses are the following:

"Semantic sharing" and "Semantic togetherness" are expected to be more frequent in mono-cultural couples than in intercultural couples.

We expected a higher degree of "Semantic separation" and "Semantic sharing" in couples asking for therapy than in couples involved for research purposes.

Marital dissatisfaction and enigmatic episodes are supposed to be more frequent in the conditions of "Semantic bidirectional exchange" and "Semantic separation" than in the other three kinds of semantic cohesion.

Marital satisfaction should be higher in the conditions of "Semantic sharing" and "Semantic Togetherness" than in the other three kinds of semantic cohesion.

Marital dissatisfaction should be higher in the intercultural non-clinical couples than in the mono-cultural non-clinical couples.

We don't expect any differences in the degree of semantic cohesion among couples who have lived together for a number of years.

The research also analyses the relation between semantic cohesion and Olson's Family and Couple cohesion.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

The 40 couples involved in the study are heterosexual and have been living together for two years, at least. Half of the couples, involved in the study, are from the same western cultural background (Europeans, Canadians, US Americans, Australians). The other half are intercultural couples, where one member is western and the other is a migrant of first generation coming from these three continents: Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Ten are mono-cultural clinical couples (they asked for therapy);

Ten are non-clinical mono-cultural couples (they didn't ask for therapy);

Ten are intercultural clinical couples;

Ten are intercultural non clinical couples.

The partners (also in the intercultural couples) will be homogenous for education and socio-economic level.

4.2 Procedure and instruments

For each couple, three videorecorded and transcribed interviews/sessions will be conducted: one with the couple and the other two with each partner alone. We will apply the emotional maps (Gabb, 2008; Gabb & Singh, 2014) to the inter-cultural couples.

4.2.1 Individual and couple semi structured interviews

Semi structured interviews will be conducted with the two nonclinical groups (20 couples) involved in the study.

The individual interview will mainly concern the partners' families of origin and their own personal story, especially before meeting the partner. Contexts, such as work or friends, in which the partner is not involved, will be investigated as well.

The couple interview will mostly focus on: a) the couple relationship; b) the strong and weak points of this relationship; c) the most conflicted and the most positive moments in their story; d) the reception each partner received from the family and from the group of friends of the other; e) how each partner considers the partner's family of origin.

As a rule, these areas are also explored in the first couple session and the two individual sessions with clinical groups.

4.2.2 The Family Semantic Grid

All the videorecorded sessions will be transcribed and then analyzed with the four versions of the Family Semantic Grid. Individual sessions will be coded with the Family Semantic Grid -The narrated semantic polarities (Ugazio, Negri, & Fellin, 2009) and with the Semantic Grid of the Dyadic Therapeutic Relationship (Ugazio & Castelli, 2015). Couple sessions will be coded with the Family Semantic Grid II - The Couple's and Family's Narrated Semantic Polarities (Ugazio & Guarnieri, in press) and the Family Semantic Grid III - The Couple's and Family's Interactive Semantic Polarities (Ugazio & Guarnieri, in preparation).

4.2.3 Emotional Maps and other instruments

We apply emotional maps to intercultural couples. "As emotional maps are not reliant on literacy or language skills", as Gabb & Singh (2014) highlighted, they can be as equally completed by partners with different language skills.

Other tools will be used to analyze marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction (for example the Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revisited, Herrington et al., 2008). The Flexibility, Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluations (Olson & Barnes, 2004) will also be administered to all the participants, whereas the Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory (Hammer, 2012) will be administered to the intercultural couples.

5. Results

Quantitative and qualitative results will be analyzed using the appropriate statistical tests and explained in the framework of semantic polarities theory and other models on couple dynamics.

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