A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF COUPLE’S PARTNERSHIP EXPERIENCES

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Despite the growing popularity of gender focused social studies in post soviet area, there is very little literature exploring what are the subjective, daily experiences of partnership in couples. The present study examined experiences of partnership among heterosexual couples which emerge through daily interactions. Phenomenological procedures were used to analyze the data. Themes were generated to delineate the descriptions of their experiences of partnership and understandings of how it affects their lives. The analysis of semi-structured interviews with both partners has shown that the questions that ask partners how they negotiate their financial and leisure time decisions, child care responsibilities and household raise issues of equal engagement and negotiation. The experiences of mutual emotional support uncover themes of closeness and autonomy. The consequences of their current arrangements disclosed feelings that are not always revealed and shared between partners. The study provides openings to consider the impact of multi-generational patterns, roles, and norms regarding gender. Study findings also suggest new research questions about how concept of partnership may serve as a discursive theme that emphasizes individual responsibility and may empower partners to amplify their ongoing changes from traditionally based patriarchal to open, diversity based way of relationship.

Keywords: partnership, couple, personal experiences.

Introduction

Couples have a lot of life tasks, expectations of who and how could manage them. Partners have interests and they want to follow them and stay connected. There are a lot of daily interactions of mutual life: conflicts, moments of intimacy, discussions. All these experiences circulate in dyadic connection of two partners. The majority of the literature focuses on relationships between nonreciprocal partnerships (therapist-client, parent-child, teacher-student). Very little research has been done on the dynamics between partners in long lasting relationship, which has “unique dynamics of interdependence, as they have the greatest potential for reciprocal, mutual exchange” (La Guardia, Patrick, 2008, p. 201).

There has been substantial research on how individuals develop intimate relationships and, in particular how love develops over time (Sher, 1996; Sternberg, 1986), few researches have examined the holistic nature of daily couple experiences of intimacy, partnership love (Lippert, Prager, 2001; Marston et al., 1998; Watts, Stenner, 2005).

Other studies focused on couple’s interactions. Neff and Karney (2005) used observational and diary data to examine spouses’ supportive interactions. Their findings suggest gender differences in timing and responsiveness to partner needs in taking and giving social support, whereas husbands and wives did not differ on average in the support they provided each other. Issues of responsiveness and interdependences are raised in Murray and Holmes study (2009). The authors describe a system of procedural or “if . . . then” rules that foster mutuality in responsiveness by informing and motivating trust and commitment, proposing a model of mutual responsiveness. But it is not clear enough, what experiences of couples emerge through daily interactions and how partners make meanings of them.

Researchers use subjective experiences of study participants as a ground from which they subsequently extract and abstract variety of cultural, psychological conceptions (Marston et al, 1998; Watts, Stenner, 2005). The way to study from ‘a subject position’ (Davies, Harre, 1990) is not new.

Taking in mind the presumption of social constructivism (Burr, 2003), that our personal experiences of partnership are interlaced with story-telling and story-receiving practices taking place within our culture, the working concepts of being partner and living in partnership should reveal in depth characteristics of couple relationship.

Despite the written literature on studying couples’ subjective experience there was no study found on the subjective experience of partnership.

The goal of this paper is to reveal the meanings of daily experienced partnership in daily arrangements. Our research question is: “What experiences and meanings couples have in mutually lived partnership of daily life?”

Methodology

In order to answer the research question, phenomenological method was chosen for a number of reasons.
First, major ways of data collection are interviews and field notes in phenomenological analysis. Informal guided interviews allow uncovering holistic nature of experience with advantage that the context and personal situation is taken into research scope (Cooligan, 2004). Second, persons being interviewed are not regarded as subjects, but as participants of reflective research. Third, participants are asked about actual daily experiences. It could show discrepancies and contradictions between how partnership is expected to be and how it is actually lived.

The interview consisted of four general questions: 1) What situations of partnership do you remember in your daily couple life? Could you tell specific examples? 2) When have you noticed partnership missing in your daily arrangements? 3) How do you characterize experience of partnership? 4) What does this experience gives to you as a couple? There were subsequent questions that could lead to develop “experience-near” description (White, 2007). The interviewees were participants of training workshop for couple partnership training, taking place during several weekends. The interviews were hold with 8 persons in 4 couples until theoretical saturation was reached. 4 men and 4 women participated in study. All participants were married from 5 to 7 years and had children. The interviews were done during pre-workshop meeting. Participants confirmed their agreement to engage in study with agreement letter. The average length of each interview was 60 minutes.

The interviews were audio taped, transcribed and analyzed according to procedures of phenomenological method (Giorgi, Giorgi 2003) by research team. The meaning units were established, where the shift of meaning was noticed. The second step was to transform the meaning units into psychologically sensitive expressions with respect the phenomenon of partnership being researched to uncover how this is lived by participants. Next step was to see what is essential about meaning units. Finally, the structure of partnership experience was carefully developed.

Results

Description of rich experience of lived partnership was achieved. Some examples of data analysis are shown in table 1.

Table 1. *Selected example of partnership experience constituents. Note not all constituents are listed because table is for demonstration purpose only*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Constituents</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V: Passing by each other. So we have passed each other this morning.</td>
<td>P1 states that he felt staying on different paths with his wife in that morning.</td>
<td>Tuning up about mutual goal. Returning to talk about what is important but not about details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning. It was everything bad, you know. But we tried after some time to</td>
<td>The situation was different in the morning and then afterwards. He felt bad in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>return afterwards. Compromise and to clear up the situation.</td>
<td>being on different paths. P1 states that efforts to return and to elucidate the situation and make compromises were done.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experiences of partnership manifested itself in 13 major themes. They are shown in picture (see Figure 1).

Each theme has both positive and negative aspects to it. Some themes appeared in every transcript (Spending time for two and giving freedom for personal time; Sharing responsibilities of household, child care Giving emotional support, helping, being safe, calm; En-counting with tension and living in difference of views Acknowledging challenge for perfection of relations), other themes were present in a few transcripts.

Experiences were taking place in different landscapes of context:

- **mutual or personal time** (“I needed to go to X place. V. adjusted his schedule, then I am free”)
- **interpersonal communication** (“when we do not talk about it, I start to interpret words”)
- **household and family projects** (such as building house) (“I say we do not need this, she says we need. We can raise an axe of fight...(smiling)”).
- **relation with others** (children, doctors) (“I did not understand why he had forbidden them (children), it is not easy to hold the same, nothing to do”)
- **financial decisions** (“finances are not about cents, that I report to him, I have income and he has”).

The structure of partnership experience being in married couple with children has characteristics of richness in feelings. Spending time together, being close and sharing responsibilities while giving freedom
for partners personal time is a core for partnership. Partners feel periods of tension and distance in emerging
differences, but strengthening of connection after return to talk about what is important, tuning up and
accepting each other. Lasting moments of emotional support, not following stereotyped notions about men
and women give safety, calm, strength, create capability to do more for others. Partnership is recognized in
negotiating expectations to each other and giving freedom to be who you are in constant change. Perceived
lack of communication is particularly felt as antithesis in women descriptions of partnership experience.
Couples have expectations about how partnership could be. Perceived discrepancy between actual
experiences and wishes may make partners become demanding with following bad feelings of frustration.
But it also turns into a challenging will to change and create.

Discussion
The aim of this study was to describe the experiences of partnership in couples. Results show, that
partners experience emotional support, helping each other, and gaining safety and calmness as one of major
parts in couples’ partnership. According to Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco (2004), partners
disclose emotionally relevant information to each other, and the extent to which partners respond to these
disclosures, intimacy is formed. This exchange is expected to be mutual, with growing intimacy in the
relationship over time. Partners indicated that consolation, listening and hearing, sharing of feelings can not
be stereotyped, for example: men can have moments of weakness as well as women. This makes partnership
equivalent and reciprocal, for what it is recognized as truly partnership. This is relevant finding for
understanding what moments of emotional support give to couple’s partnership.

Couples name their experience as partnership, when negotiations and arrangements are made about
their mutual and personal time. Blais et al. (1990) showed that self-dependance in couple relationship, brings
greater agreement and affection between partners. Our study shows, that the very process of making
arrangements is accepted as the way of being in partnership. The interests in interdependence-life tasks are
viewed as prone to inevitable conflict (Holmes, 2002). Relationship is mutually responsive when partners
anticipate and meet needs of another partner. La Guardia, Patrick (2008) say that “partners create a
“relationship contract” about the expectations that each has for themselves and for the other in the
relationship”. The resolutions to some kind of equilibrium are recognized as partnering behavior. Even
more, partnership appeared to be a condition for continuity of being together. This is relevant result for
trying to understand the preconditions of stable and satisfying relationship.

Couples in this study were very clear about situations when they recognized their differences.
Differences were about child rearing, philosophical, religious questions, spending money and mutual projects
of families, such as maintenance or building a house. The partnership is about dealing with differences and
about the way it is communicated and negotiated. It was mentioned that it is not so important to agree on
every simple detail. The tension about having differences was apparent. Results indicate, that couples are
trying to resolve situations of different views by making compromise, by accepting other person and oneself.
According to Knee, Patrick, Vietor, Nanayakkara (2002) “when partner is motivated by growth, one tends to
embrace rather than attack differences in others and one is less likely to judge others through one’s own
eyes” (p.612). Female partners shared, how important the communication with their partner is, they
appreciated these moments of talking about important things, while male partners indicated more time
spending together as expression of being in partnership. Does this result show that we are at the edge of
identifying gendered differences of partnership experience? It is too early to conclude. Due to limitations of
our study, that interviews were guided together with both partners, the differences in partnership experiences
were not exposed. This was not our goal. Nevertheless more research could be done about the meaning of
verbalized and non verbalized experiences in couple.

Conclusions
Partnership according to couples in this study is supportive, challenging, meaningful and changing
pattern of relationship. In addition, partnership makes basis for common living in diverse, non stereotyped,
negotiated manner. Support from partner in finding better mutual solutions of sharing child care and
household responsibilities and financial decisions is not taken for granted. The topic of partnership opens
themes of individual responsibility and may empower partners to amplify their ongoing changes from
traditionally based patriarchal to open, diversity based way of relationship. More research needs to be done
on decision making in couples, dealing with differences, motives to sustain partnership pattern in their
relationship.
References


