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Critical Perspectives in the Exploration of Meanings of Intimacy¹

Rather than the subject of scientific research, intimacy often seems to be considered the domain of all sorts of agony aunts writing online advice columns. When the need to define intimacy for research purposes arises, it turns out to be problematic. The issue of intimacy has been largely trivialised by popular opinions and cliché definitions. It transpires that we “sense” what intimacy is more than we actually know what the term means. This is a sphere of life which is very often taboo and at the same time highly idealized. This text is intended to present the most adequate scientific definitions of what we consider intimacy in everyday life, and at the same time to “demystify” this realm of human experience. Simultaneously, an attempt will be made to demonstrate the value of having a critical perspective in the process of discovering the many meanings of intimacy. They are inextricably linked with the ever changing and constantly evolving discourses of love, which are eternally present in the public space and penetrate into the world of science, at the same time contributing to the dominance of a single, relatively rigid scheme of interpretation in the research on these most personal areas of everyday life. Finally, selected concepts of Pierre Bourdieu’s and Michel Foucault’s theories will be discussed, together with an indication of possible ways of applying them as a new analytical framework for removing the taboos surrounding intimate relationships and investigating the hidden aspects thereof.

Polish social pedagogy and family sociology are dominated by the discourse of family intimacy. It is a sphere defined from the point of view of family and marital relations, often idealized, but without an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the two partners forming the core of the family, or the ways in which they experience intimacy in a relationship (*cf.* Ostrouch-Kamińska 2011, pp. 31–40). This is a subject that is neglected and ignored. By definition, the intimate remains private, which is why intimacy appears to be a difficult to define and elusive object of research.

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This paper will outline the possibilities of the critical analysis of intimate relationships from the viewpoint of Bourdieu's and Foucault's social theory. The aim is to answer the question whether and to what extent a critical perspective will allow us to interpret the processes of constructing intimate relationships and perceptions about them, as well as the ways of experiencing intimate relationships.

(Re)defining Intimacy

According to Robert Sternberg (2006, p. 185; Wojciszke 2011, pp. 336–338), intimacy is one of the components of love. It comprises all the positive feelings we have towards the partner and the actions that reflect those feelings. Intimacy may be described in the following terms:

- warm and loving contacts,
- mutual understanding,
- emotional reassurance,
- kindness,
- sense of security and peace in the presence of the partner,
- being able to count on the partner,
- support and help.

Such an understanding of intimacy may be identified with (Wojciszke 2010, pp. 10–11):

- the desire to promote the welfare of the partner,
- experiencing happiness with and because of the partner,
- high regard for the partner,
- being able to count on the partner in the time of need,
- mutual understanding,
- sharing of one's self and one's possessions with the partner,
- giving and receiving of emotional support,
- intimate communication,
- valuing the partner as an important part of one's life.

These components may be regarded as a set of practices characteristic for intimate relationships. According to Bourdieu's theory, they are generated by the habitus.

The structure of intimacy, i.e. the configuration of the above-mentioned factors, does not depend on whether this concerns love for a life partner, father, mother, siblings or a friend of the same sex. Intimacy appears in all these relationships with different intensity, but it is always a collection of experiences characteristic of love in general (Wojciszke 2010).

It is also important to note that intimacy in a relationship gradually disappears. In the friendly relationship phase, halting the decline in intimacy becomes a fundamental problem. It is about maintaining mutual emotional attachment, affection, trust, and willingness to give and receive support. Intimacy may fade away as a result of egoism, intolerance, aggression, absence of support or infidel-

ity (Wojciszke 2011, pp. 345–346). It seems, however, that in certain relationships intimacy in this sense does not have a chance to develop at all, because factors such as intolerance, aggression or infidelity have existed from the very beginning. Nevertheless, due to various mechanisms, such as the discourse of a “happy family” or marital and family myths (Kocik 2006, pp. 80–90) imprinted in the course of socialization, the partners continue to pursue and remain in such relationships. However, there is also some kind of intimacy in these relationships. This suggests that the psychological approach to love is incomplete.

In fact, intimacy is a scarcely tangible, dispersed, and undefined object of research. What is certain, however, is that intimacy is reflected in the practices undertaken by the partners towards each other, and at the same time it determines those practices.

Contemporary Discourses of Love – Idealizing Living as a Couple

Reliable research on the sense of intimacy is hampered greatly by the tendency to idealize family and marital relationships, a tendency which is also encountered in academic approaches. This is due to the fact that the research is often founded upon the “natural and self-evident” premises arising from the prevailing discourses of love. According to Maciej Gdula (2009), nowadays (based on the analysis of self-help books on love) we are able to distinguish three main discourses of love present in the public sphere:

1) utopian

There is an absence of external criteria for evaluating the relationship. The discourse is dominated by rationalisation, involving a debate about a fair and balanced division of labour, as well as the assumption that it is possible to remain in a close relationship, even though fully complementary relations are not possible due to undeniable “natural” differences between women and men. This discourse contains references to socio-biology.

2) utilitarian

Here love is portrayed as a game. The relationship is defined in terms of profit and loss; partners get together only when they are able to produce more goods together than on their own. The union should be managed as an enterprise and treated as a long-term investment. It is a discourse “fuelled” by the theory of social exchange.

3) traditional

It emphasizes the “natural” completeness of the relationship between a woman and a man, with children as its “natural” consequence. Spouses should exercise control over their sexuality, as sex is meant to be, by its nature, procreative. Any “friction” in the relationship is blamed on cultural decay and if relationships disintegrate, this is due to the “toxic” environment and not the partners themselves. Such discourse is in keeping with the conservative Catholic discourse and is often found in research on the structure and functions of the family in pedagogy.

If an attempt was made to reconstruct the definition of intimacy inherent in the discourses mentioned above, the differences would be profound. Utopian discourse assumes the existence of differences, which make women predisposed to certain behaviours towards a partner, while men are predisposed to others. Women are more inclined to take care of their partner, it comes naturally to them. Furthermore, when it comes to happiness, women and men find it in different ways, thus it is essential to be aware of these mutual preferences in order to be able to make your partner happy. Respect for the partner is based on understanding these mechanisms. It is assumed that the relationship is about sharing goods and experiences, but sometimes there is not enough room for genuine interest, and then (for the sake of the relationship) it is necessary to pretend that the partner's experiences are of interest to us. This is especially true for men, as they do not have a natural gift of interest in their partner's experiences. You can use material goods to "buy" the happiness of another person. Women are also more inclined to provide emotional support, while men need to master adequate ways to act in this area. Sharing intimate information usually serves to achieve simultaneous satisfaction of the partners. Having a partner and being in a relationship seems to be an important component of life, while, at the same time, making life more difficult.

In the utilitarian discourse, the constituents of intimacy are treated as resources. It is rather a matter of one's own benefit than the welfare of the partner. Happiness is achieved only when the benefits are multiplied. Respect for the partner arises when the partner actually helps to maximize these gains. The belief that you may count on each other is also linked to the possibility of pooling resources. A common goal, i.e. maximizing returns, makes partners understand each other better. Material values are superior to spiritual ones – women are at the forefront of their acquisition. In terms of giving and receiving emotional support, there is also a clear asymmetry – it is men who benefit more. The exchange of intimate information is a means of reaping the benefits in the form of satisfaction. A relationship and a partner are important as long as they help to maximize profits.

In traditional discourse, it is the man who is supposed to be the breadwinner, and the woman who is supposed to safeguard the home "infrastructure". Giving and receiving emotional support is of limited importance – what is important is keeping up the appearances. The exchange of intimate information is necessary, for example, to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. The use of natural family planning methods requires the partner to be informed about the fertile and infertile days on which sexual intercourse can be initiated. The partner and relationship are at the heart of the value hierarchy, but this is because of complying with the external norms.

All these discourses are linked to science by a specific dialectical relationship. Their components are the product of academic reflections (psychological, sociological and pedagogical), while at the same time re-impacting the awareness and perception of intimacy by researchers. However, these discourses rarely contribute to understanding the true nature of intimate relationships because they are enslaved by external norms, moral imperatives, structural conditions and internalised beliefs about gender and sexuality.

Critical Approaches to Intimacy

It is worth considering what critical theory can contribute to the analysis of intimate relations. What is a relationship of two people in the light of critical theory? What nuances omitted in the dominant discourses does this perspective allow us to capture?

In Bourdieu's theory, the key factors in the analysis of intimate relationships are as follows:

- 1) the theory of practice, especially the problem of the adaptation of practices to structures (models constructed on the basis of discourse),
- 2) the problem of acquiring practices as mediation between the structure and the systems that it produces, and the habitus – understood as the effect of structures and, at the same time, the principle of externalizing what is acquired in the form of practices,
- 3) the concept of symbolic violence – explaining the mechanisms of subordinating certain social groups to others and imposing on them the perspective of the dominant groups in perceiving and evaluating reality.

As regards the issue of adapting intimate life practices to models previously constructed on the basis of the discourse, Bourdieu's assumptions (1990, p. 52) are as follows:

- 1) the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and thus intimacy itself is also constructed,
- 2) the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions.

This means that through the dominant discourses, representations of relationships are formed in people's minds, which determine their expectations towards this type of relationship (expected results) and the practices undertaken. Discourses, however, ignore important aspects of intimacy, thus generating false representations of such relationships, and, consequently, unrealistic expectations of the relationship/partner and practices that are not suited to the objective circumstances. In such cases, being in a relationship generates dissonances, which inevitably lead to the modification of the representations. Since they are constructs – however, represented, modified, shared and passed on in the process of interaction – their modification is always somehow "skewed" by the discourse, and is never determined solely by past experiences. It may therefore lead to the emergence of further false representations of relationships, further maladjusted practices and further dissonances.

When referring to the process of acquiring practices, understood as mediation between the structure and the systems that it produces, the role of the habitus cannot be overlooked. It is necessary to embrace here the understanding of the habitus as the effect of structures and, at the same time, the principle of externalizing what is acquired in the form of practices. To quote Bourdieu: "The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of clas-

sification (*principium divisionis*) of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the *habitus*, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of lifestyles, is constituted" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 170). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that it is the *habitus* that generates the practices undertaken towards the partner in the relationship. If the partners are equipped with different *habitus*, they will also generate other practices, and their own practices may be interpreted by the partner inconsistently with their intentions. Given that men and women are equipped with a different gender *habitus*, we should anticipate the emergence of a number of problems associated with such a mismatch. Furthermore, Bourdieu admits that "the system of *matching* properties, which includes people [...] is organized by taste, a system of classificatory schemes which may only very partially become conscious although, as one rises in the social hierarchy, lifestyle is increasingly a matter of what Weber calls the 'stylization of life'" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 174). One of the possible interpretations of these words assumes that women and men, with different *habitus*, acquire different schemes of classifying practices in the course of socialization, i.e. they develop a different taste. This clearly concerns what the partners approve of within each other and what they expect of each other. The process of socialisation makes these expectations all too often quite contradictory. Girls are imprinted with a script which consists in searching for a charming, chivalrous and loving knight in shining armour. In adulthood, however, it turns out that there is a shortage of knights, as boys are socially conditioned to dominate over women and this dominance stretches over the sphere of eroticism as well. Often this dominance is linked to physical violence and has little to do with the "love" for which girls are groomed. In short, boys expect their life partner to be a "sexy uninhibited maid", while girls want to be "princesses", pursued and adored. In this situation an evident conflict of interest arises. This explains the frequent disillusionment with first relationships.

Rarely do intimate experiences end with the first relationship, however. As Bourdieu puts it, "the *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 54). All existing and past experiences of "being-in-a-relationship", both in the individual and collective sense, make us acquire schemes of perception, thinking and action in an intimate relationship, i.e. we construct representations of intimate relationships. And they certainly differ considerably depending on the gender *habitus*.

According to Bourdieu, "*habitus* is an infinite capacity for generating products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from the creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original con-

ditioning" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 55). Therefore, all newly formed unions are the product of previous experiences, individual and collective, as well as internalised knowledge, individual and collective, about relationships and practices that are at the same time the result of these experiences and an attempt to adapt to new objective circumstances.

Drawing on the legacy of Bourdieu's theory of practice, it can be concluded that the practices associated with the functioning in a relationship are produced by the habitus. Habitus is a structured structuring structure. This means that the whole process of socialization and the norms and values that we assimilate, characteristic of the social class we come from, produce different ideas and expectations about relationships. This is why we engage in different behaviours in relationships and expect different consequences of these behaviours. The degree to which practices are adapted to objective circumstances may also vary. The dynamics of a relationship are therefore continuously (re)negotiated and shaped by and within the discourse.

The concept of symbolic violence shows that there is only one perspective in the discourse – the heteronormative one. It dominates in each of the discourses of love listed above. In the traditional understanding of a household and the family an asymmetry of power relations is inscribed. A family, in its traditional sense, is a reflection of the power relations prevailing in a society where women are a subjugated group, which is manifested in a system of symbolic practices that naturalize the social order with the dominant position of men. These practices are most clearly discernible in the process of gender socialization, aimed at maintaining the traditional order and the masculine *status quo*.

Symbolic violence makes the dominant discourses of love incorporate the values, norms and perspective of the dominant group, i.e. heterosexual men. From this standpoint, in each of the discourses, a successful relationship is based on a woman's sacrifice. This is one of the invisible determinants of functioning in a relationship, conditioned by the female habitus.

The heteronormative matrix in the realm of intimate relationships may be examined even more closely, using the interpretative framework derived from the works of Foucault (1978; 1977). Two aspects seem to be of particular relevance in a critical analysis:

- 1) understanding gender and sexuality as normative, organizing categories,
- 2) treating gender as a construct to control sexuality.

The categories of gender and sexuality serve as instruments for preserving the heteronormative order. A discourse of power is inherent to them. The field of family, and indeed the area of relations between partners, represents an arena of constant power struggles rather than a safe haven and refuge. This is absent from any of the dominant discourses.

In the vast majority of studies and socio-educational analyses, the phenomenon of power is rarely discussed². Relationships are rather interpreted as a quest

² With a notable exception of the work of Eugenia Mandal (2011).

to reach consensus. As Eugenia Mandal noted, researchers seem to assume that the family is the most idyllic place in the world, where power or struggle for power does not exist. But meanwhile, it can be observed in many situations occurring in marriage and in the family, which for most people represents a fundamental value and a source of happiness. At the same time it is the family home which criminologists call the “most dangerous place on Earth after sunset” (Mandal 2011, p. 161). It also seems that the prevalent interpretation of intimacy does not take into account the confrontation of partners or the interplay between understanding, closeness and support and sacrifice, feelings of resentment and retribution, or even revenge.

The discursively formed gender binarism remains in the service of heteronormativity – no “difference” in relations is tolerated. The binarism of gender and dispositions viewed as “natural” for each of them means that any non-normative behaviour within the relationship is rejected, kept hidden by the partners, and, when discovered by the environment, socially stigmatized. This applies especially to homosexual relationships, which are most often concealed from the community (such is the social requirement), and when discovered and disclosed, they are constantly “cropped” to the norms typical for heterosexual relationships and evaluated according to such norms. A critical perspective, by exposing the hidden aspects of relationships, allows us to explore the space of the experience of partners in homosexual relationships without this heteronormative cliché. Social representations appear in this context as a neutral analytical category, as they do not emphasize gender roles. It should be noted, however, that the very process of constructing social representations about gay relationships is also determined by the heteronormative socialisation schemes. However, once the process of their modification begins, a greater role seems to be played by past experiences, while socialisation factors are of lesser importance (mainly due to the negligible occurrence of such models in the public space).

The dialectic of subordination and subjugation referred to by Foucault as “subjectification” takes place in the process of socialization, through behaviour marked by symbolic violence. Medicalisation, particularly pronounced in the traditional discourse of love, is an instrument of control subordinated to the imperatives of morality. Such tendencies are illustrated, for example, by disputes in political discourse centred around contraception, or by noticing and valuing behaviours that are not in line with the standards of dominant groups, which are referred to in discourse as deviations and aberrations, etc. That which is intimate is forced into the mechanism of exclusions, hollow places in the system of the knowledge and the power of society.

And just as, according to Foucault, the discourse on sex seems to conceal its problems (the more you talk about sex, the thicker the “veil” of the discourse that hides it), so in the case of love the dominant discourses make the true nature of one of its components, intimacy, more and more concealed (Foucault 1978). The neutralization of discourses is facilitated by the shared and natural experiences of intimacy. The purpose of love discourses is to keep women in a state of subordination – especially to the rigors of attractiveness, which requires a variety of practices

that modify the appearance and are designed to evoke a sense of pleasure in the partner in many different ways. These practices are determined by discourse, and their carriers are both science and the mass media, popular self-help books, psychological work, or the socialisation process.

In conclusion, critical theory may allow research to touch upon what the dominant discourses, speaking of love, continue to consistently and invariably hide, such as, but not limited to, the “murky” structural conditions of love and intimacy. It also creates an opportunity to identify uniform criteria for the interpretation of data on the experience of intimacy in relationships by both heterosexual and homosexual couples. Moreover, it allows us to investigate the aspects of constructing social representations of relationships and the role of public discourse in this process, which makes it one of the most promising perspectives on contemporary intimate relations, dynamic and negotiable.

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Summary

Critical Perspective in the Exploration of Meanings of Intimacy

This paper is designed to provide the most relevant scientific definitions of what we are used to call “intimacy”, but also to slightly “demystify” this sphere of human expe-

rience. At the same time the author attempts to demonstrate the usefulness of a critical perspective in the exploration of multiple meanings of intimacy. They are inextricably linked with the discourses of love – variable over time and continuously prone to numerous modifications. They are constantly present in the public sphere and they penetrate the world of science, contributing to the dominance of a single, relatively rigid schema of interpretation of existing research on the most intimate areas of everyday life.

Keywords

intimacy, love, everyday life, privacy, change

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