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2023-02-16

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Perakyla , A , Tauroginski , B , Dejko-Wanczyk , K , Jozefik , B , Furgal , M , Matusiak , F & Janusz , B 2023 , ' The paradox of disengagement : Bodily displays of inattention in couple therapy ' , Frontiers in Communication , vol. 8 , 1066475 , pp. 1-11 . <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1066475>

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/356768>

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1066475>

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## SPECIALTY SECTION

This article was submitted to  
Multimodality of Communication,  
a section of the journal  
Frontiers in Communication

RECEIVED 10 October 2022

ACCEPTED 09 January 2023

PUBLISHED 16 February 2023

## CITATION

Peräkylä A, Taurogiński B, Dejko-Wańczyk K,  
Józefik B, Furgat M, Matusiak F and Janusz B  
(2023) The paradox of disengagement: Bodily  
displays of inattention in couple therapy.  
*Front. Commun.* 8:1066475.  
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2023.1066475

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# The paradox of disengagement: Bodily displays of inattention in couple therapy

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Using concepts developed by Goffman and the theory of inter-corporeality, this paper describes non-speaking spouses' responses to complaints made about them by the other spouse in the context of couple therapy first consultations. While the turn-taking system of couple therapy effectively precludes the possibility of a direct verbal response, non-speaking spouses often display bodily their disengagement from their spouse's talk. Using multimodal conversation analysis as the method, we show the repertoire of such disengagement behaviors and trace the moment-by-moment contexts in which they arise. While disengagement behaviors embody their producer's inattention to their spouse's talk, at the same time, they are, paradoxically, interactional moves produced in the presence of others, conveying their producer's negative stance to the ongoing talk. We argue that the timing of these disengagement practices involves anticipation of the direction of talk: non-speaking spouses display disengagement in moments when the speaking spouse's talk takes a direction toward an intensification of complaints about them.

## KEYWORDS

couple therapy, disengagement, complaining, inter-corporeality, conversation analysis, Goffman

## 1. Introduction

Couple therapy participants face a particular challenge—being complained about by their intimate partner in the presence of a third person. The spouses are searching for help with the problems that they have encountered in their marital and family life. In explaining these problems to the therapist, they inevitably convey dissatisfaction, not only with themselves and with their functioning as a couple, but also, and often primarily, with each other. The turn-taking system in couple therapy first consultations limits the speaking rights of the participants so that they are predominantly expected to confine themselves to answering the therapist's questions, and not to self-initiate turns at talk (cf. Peräkylä, 1995). Only later, when the therapist shifts the turn to the complained-about party through a question addressed to them, might there arise a possibility to verbally respond to the complaint. As a result, situations arise recurrently where one spouse tells the therapist about their dissatisfaction with the other spouse. This dissatisfaction and its expressions are often emotional and even bitter. The other spouse's challenge is this: how to listen to complaints about themselves presented by their spouse in a situation where they are not allowed to directly respond to them.

In this paper, we will examine the non-speaking spouses' responses to the complaints made about them by the other spouse in the context of couple therapy first consultations. As we will show, the non-speaking spouses often display bodily their disengagement from their spouse's talk. We will show the repertoire of such disengagement behaviors and trace the

moment-by-moment contexts in which they arise. Rather than offering conclusive results, the paper at hand offers *proof of concept* (cf. Tschacher and Meier, 2019): we show that bodily disengagement in this particular context can be analyzed as a meaningful contribution to interaction.

## 2. Engagement, participation, complaints, and inter-corporeality in interaction research

*Engagement* is one key notion in this study. To be engaged means to show with one's actions and body that one is willingly and wholeheartedly taking part in the encounter at hand and focusing one's attention on the action and participants (Peräkylä et al., 2022). Engagement was a theme that the sociologist Erving Goffman dealt with throughout his career (Goffman, 1957, 1963, 1974). As is typical for Goffman, he used alternating words to refer to the same field of phenomena; alongside engagement, he spoke about "involvement" and "engrossment".

The body can index a person's response to what is happening in the interaction at hand. (Goffman, 1963, p. 37) pointed out that "bodily activities (...) seem well designed to provide information about the individual's involvement". Synthesizing the Goffmanian perspective on engagement (Goffman, 1957, 1963, 1964, 1974), we recently argued that engagement involves postural and perceptual orientation to the co-participants of the encounter, and that such orientation indexes attention and is intertwined with collaborative involvement in the activity at hand (see also Bergmann and Peräkylä, *in press*; Peräkylä et al., 2022). In his early works (Goffman, 1957, 1963), Goffman explored the interaction between a participants' moral obligation to show engagement with their talk and their bodies to indicate that they are being attentive. He also discussed forms of disengagement: being engaged with activities other than the shared activity of the encounter (e.g., side involvements, such as knitting while attending a seminar), and being engaged with one's own body or own thoughts during the ongoing encounter (auto-involvements). Especially in his early article, "Alienation from Interaction", Goffman (1957) painted a picture of social encounters as a field where the participant is subjected to a bi-directional pull: there is the moral obligation to be fully engaged and attentive, and there is the ever-present tendency to withdraw from the engagement. Withdrawal can be prompted by preoccupations other than the interaction at hand, or by the person being conscious of their own or the other's interactional performance. The couple therapy setting has proved to be a kind of social encounter that is rich in different forms of disengagement that were the focus of our investigation.

The second key notion in our study is *complaining*. Heinemann and Traverso (2009) define complaints as actions that "express feelings of discontent about some state of affairs, for which responsibility can be attributed to 'someone'" (p. 2381). The verbal and prosodic resources in the build-up, delivery, and reception of complaints have been intensively investigated (see, e.g., Pomerantz, 1986; Drew and Holt, 1988; Drew, 1998; Schegloff, 2005; Monzoni, 2009; Couper-Kuhlen, 2012). Using somewhat different terms, Buttny (1993) and Edwards (1995) have investigated complaining in couple therapy. While Buttny explored reciprocal action patterns (blame-counter-blame; blame-account), Edwards investigated the ways in

which spouses' descriptions of problematic events depict these as arising from the other spouse's personality or their enduring state of mind.

Complaining usually involves three roles: (1) the one who does the complaint, (2) the one to whom it is addressed, and (3) the one whom it is about (the target of the complaint). Often, the incumbent of the third role is absent from the complaining situation, and the dynamics of complaint involve, to a large degree, elicitation and displays of affiliation from the addressee of the complaint (e.g., Pomerantz, 1986; Couper-Kuhlen, 2012). If the target of the complaint is present, the dynamics become more complicated (Heinemann and Traverso, 2009; Laforest, 2009). Recently, Wilkinson et al. (2023) showed how a complaint about a co-present party addressed to someone else other than the target of the complaint creates an expectation for the target to respond, in spite of the fact that the complaint was not addressed to them. However, as Peräkylä (1995) showed, the expectation to respond may be restrained in institutional settings such as counseling. In this study, we examined the actions of the targets of complaints in a setting where their opportunity for verbally responding is restricted.

Our third key notion is *intercorporeality*. Importantly, in the couple therapy first encounters that we investigated, the targets of the complaints did not respond verbally. Yet, as we will argue, their bodily conduct was responsive to the complaint. In recent years, interaction researchers inspired by Merleau-Ponty (1962) have increasingly started to understand social interaction as a thoroughly corporeal process (see Meyer et al., 2017). Drawing upon Fuchs (2018), we understand body movements as a participants' way of relating to, and acting upon, the affective affordances of the situation. Thus, we consider the spouses' body movements and postures that we observed in this paper as a means of embodying their presence in a situation where they are being complained about: embodying ways of perceiving complaints, evaluating them, and acting on them (see also Loenhoff, 2017). The paradox of disengagement arises from this: by showing their disengagement bodily, the spouses actually take a stance regarding what is being said.

In this paper, the three abovementioned threads of interaction research—*engagement*, *complaints* and *inter-corporeality*—will be intertwined. We investigated couple therapy interactions in moments when one spouse was talking to the therapist (answering his/her question) and, in their talk, conveying a complaint about the other spouse who was co-present. We will examine how this other spouse—the unaddressed recipient, yet the subject of the complaint—responds bodily to the complaint, then and there, during the spouse's talk. We will show how this bodily response involves displays of disengagement, and argue that, paradoxically, the displays of disengagement convey their producer's emotional stance to the complaint.

## 3. Data and methods

The data of our study involves eight couple therapy first consultations conducted in a family therapy center in Northern Poland. In this center, therapy sessions are regularly video recorded for the purpose of training and supervision. We chose to analyze first consultations because, in them, complaints are regularly formulated (in response to the therapist's questions about the couple's reason for seeking therapy) and because the content of the talks in them is

accessible to the analyst, as there is not yet a shared history of therapy sessions that would inform the participants' inferences of each other's talk. Eight therapists (5 female, 3 male) participated in the study, and all had systemic training. The couples were informed about the research project and were asked about their willingness to participate in it. Those who agreed to participate finally signed a statement of agreement. Out of the eight couples participating in the study, six had long-term problems in their relationships and two couples came to the therapy because of an acute crisis in their marital relations. The long-term problems in six couples were associated with problems in personality and diagnosed by the therapists as "personality disorders" (Shedler and Westen, 2007). Even though the personality pathology might be associated with the participants' inclination to display disengagement, essentially all patients employed the whole array of disengagement behaviors that will be described below. Therefore, in this qualitative study, the diagnostic categories are not treated as relevant.

As typical in conversation analytical studies, we started the analysis of the video data through an "unmotivated" exploration (Maynard, 2013), wanting to understand the social interactions in couple therapy first consultations. Having noticed that the non-speaking spouses, through their gaze, body posture, and body movement, regularly became disengaged from interactions, we examined in more detail the interactional contexts of such disengagement behaviors. We began to see associations between their bodily conduct and the complaining content of the conversation. That led us to systematically coding all instances of complaining in our data. While the usual length of a session is 60 min, the average length of time of "complaining talk" per session was about 9 min. The patients were disengaged for about half of the time that they were complained about. By qualitatively analyzing the multimodal interaction during such segments, we came up with the typology of disengagement behaviors that we present in this paper.

In our analysis, we alternated between working directly with video data, annotating the videos with ELAN software, and transcribing the segments of interest. All sessions were transcribed using orthographic notation. The segments involving complaints were transcribed in CA notation (Hepburn and Bolden, 2013). In the segments presented in this paper, we combine CA notation with Mondada (2019) notation for non-verbal behavior.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Complaining about the spouse

Before we turn to the bodily practices that are the core of this paper, we will introduce the verbal contexts from which they emerge. In couple therapy consultations, the spouses are often asked about the problems that brought them to therapy. Answers to the therapist's question can convey open or implicit complaints about the other spouse. An example is given in Extract 1 below. Just before the extract, the husband had been describing his expectations of the therapy, saying that he hoped that the problems "with communication" would "solve themselves", adding that he hoped that "the sexual spheres" would be "worked out" (data not shown). The therapist's follow-up question is in line 1, where he asked the husband to clarify what he meant by problems of communication.

#### Extract 1 [B1]

```
01 T: Co to znaczy problemy z komunikacją?
      What does it mean problems with communication?
02 (2.5)
03 H: hmm #no:# (2.0) [no wiadnie (1.0) #mm:# (1.0) to z jednej strony
      hmm #well:# (2.0) [that's the point (1.0) #mm:# (1.0) on the one hand
04 taka *komunikacja >że że< hmm: jest cały czas (.)
      such *communication >that that< hmm: all the time (.)
05 j::akaś .hhh jakąś jakiś jakieś
      the::re is .hhh a kind kind kind of
06 [obiecanie czegoś coś powiedz*enie (.)
      [promising of something saying something (.)
07 typu [zaraz:: (.) i i i* i za tym tak naprawdę
      like any minute:: (.) And and and and and there is truly
08 [nic nie nic nie idzie*
      [nothing nothing that would follow it*
```

In his answer in lines 3–8, the husband described the problematic communication by depicting the "promising of something" (line 6) that leads to nothing (lines 7–8). There was no direct person reference, but in their context, the broken promises could be inferred as the wife's promises having to do with sex. Thereby, the attribution of responsibility is also conveyed.

The spouses that are complained about, as in Extract 1, must find a way to relate to what they are hearing. The institutional framing of the couple therapy session effectively inhibits them from responding verbally: the therapist has allocated the turn to the other spouse, thus the one being talked about needs to remain silent during the answer and after it, until the therapist allocates a turn to them. However, the restrictions in turn-taking do not prevent the spouses from non-verbal actions. In examining our data, we observed recurrent bodily practices that occurred during a spouse complaining. Most of these practices, shown below, involve bodily displays of disengagement. Yet the complained-about spouse can also show engagement with the complaining talk, and we will start by showing such a case.

### 4.2. Engagement: Looking at the speaker

When the target of a spouse's talk looks at the speaker, he or she shows that he/she is attending to what the spouse is saying. Extract 2 below is an example. The wife answered the therapist's question about things that she would like to address in therapy, and spoke about the division of roles in the marriage. Throughout the interview, she depicted this reversal of roles as problematic for her. While she spoke, the wife was looking toward the therapist. The husband was looking at the wife from the beginning of her answer (line 1); he shifted his gaze to the therapist at the possible point of completion of the answer (end of line 1) and returned it to the wife when she continued her answer (line 3), keeping his gaze directed at her until the end of the extract. The wife's description of the reversal of roles can be understood as a complaint; feelings of discontent were embodied also in her trembling voice and in her facial expression. There was no explicit attribution of responsibility, but contextually we understood that the husband bore at least part of the blame. Through looking at the wife, the husband showed that he was attending his wife's speech. The constellation where the complaining speaker looks at the addressee (in our cases, the therapist) and the subject of the complaint looks at the speaker can be found also in indirect complaints in everyday talk analyzed recently by Wilkinson et al. (2023). Frame 1 is from a key point in the complaint in line 3. All frames in this paper are drawings meticulously reproducing the participants' body postures in the original frame graphs, while securing their anonymity. In each

session, the therapist was sitting in front of the couple but was not shown in the video.

Extract 2 [C1 PF Wife 0.25-0.50]



Frame 1: Looking at the speaker

01 W: My mamy generalnie hhh odwrócone role moc+no.  
 We have generally inverted roles strongly  
 Generally, our roles are strongly reversed.  
 h:>>gazing at W -----t--> gazing at T  
 (2.0)

03 W: ja mogłabym być y: tatam (.) a mał by mógł być mamom.\*  
 I could be father and husband could be mother  
 I could be the father and my husband could be the mother  
 h:\$-> gazing W \*Frame 1

04 wydaje mi się że tak y z podejściem  
 It seems to me that his approach to

05 do dzieci był >bo ja raczej trzymam tej dyscyplinę:<  
 children was, because it is rather me who keeps the discipline

In our data, the speakers were predominantly gazing toward the therapist (the addressee), as was the case in Extract 2 above. However, for moments when the speaker glanced at the target, see extracts 8 and 9 below. The target of the complaint looking at the spouse who was complaining, like in Extract 2 above, was not uncommon in our data. The targets' shorter glances at the speakers can also be seen in extracts 3, 5, and 9 below. Yet, it often happened that the target of the complaint, rather than looking at the speaker, displayed *disengagement* from the interaction at hand. In the extracts below, we will show the array of practices for showing disengagement.

There is a paradox in the disengagement behaviors that we observed. On one hand, as these behaviors involved turning the gaze and body away from the speaker, they embody *inattention* in relation to the spouse's ongoing talk. Some of these behaviors also included *involvement in something else*, such as one's own body. Thus, the disengagement behaviors indicated that the disengaged person was *not* willingly and wholeheartedly taking part in the encounter and was *not* focusing their attention on what was being said. But there is another side of the coin: these behaviors took place within an encounter and during the other spouse talking about the spouse who was displaying the behavior. These behaviors were produced in the perceptual presence of other interactants. For that reason, while performing displays of inattention, disengagement behaviors paradoxically indicated their producer's *attention* and *stance* regarding the talk and the other participants.

### 4.3. Practices of disengagement

Below, we will show snapshots of practices of disengagement. They can be roughly and intuitively ordered, in terms of the extent of the withdrawal from engagement and which aspect of body compartment and body parts they concern.

Perhaps the simplest and the least salient practice of disengagement involves **passive looking-away**. In Extract 3 below, the husband was complaining about the wife not understanding his "... way of proceeding and functioning." (line 2). The wife responded

by agreeing (line 3); before her utterance was completed, the husband cut in and delivered an elaboration on his complaint (lines 4–11). During the husband's initial complaint (lines 1–2) the wife's gaze was directed somewhat downwards, in a direction that was away from the husband and the therapist that the husband was talking to. When she uttered her agreement in line 3, she for a moment gazed at the husband, and thereafter probably shifted her gaze to the therapist. After the husband had taken the turn from her (line 4), she returned her gaze to the previous position (front and down) while the answer continued. Her gaze remained in this position until the end of the husband's complaint (see Frame 2). This gazing away indexes a lack of engagement with the husband's talk. However, this display was passive: the wife did not indicate any other attentional object, nor did she involve herself in any competing action or gesture.

Extract 3 [NPD 1 Sesia KB]



Frame 2: passive looking away [NPD1.F.3.avi]

01 H: ale ona DO PROSTU nie rozumie eiii  
 but she just simply doesn't understand erm.:  
 w: >> looking down and front

02 ~~mojego: jakby sposobu: i dzialania i funkcjonowania.~~  
~~my: like way: of proceeding and functioning.~~

03 W: tak i tutaj sie też zgodzam bo rzeczywiście znacz =  
 yes and here I also agree because really I mean =  
 w: looking at H \$-----\$ --> looking down and front

04 H: =Nawet jeśli cały rok nie piłem piwa,  
 =Eventhough I didn't drink beer for a whole year,  
 05 to i tak był problem, jak jak zapytałem ja, czy w sobote  
 there was a problem anyway, when when I asked her, if I  
 06 może: bym wpadł do kumpła i >byłbym sobie coś wypił.<  
 may I visit a buddy on Saturday and >we could drink<.

07 I to był problem. (0.5) I była woina\*.  
 It was a problem. 0.5) And there was war\*.  
 \*Frame 2

08 (2.0)

09 H: To nie jest taki problem, że ja piję piwo.  
 It is not a problem that I drink beer.

10 To jest taki problem, że ona ma jakiś problem w  
 It is a problem that she has some problem in

11 >przetwarzaniu tej informacji,<  
 >processing this information<.

The passive looking-away depicted in Frame 2 above involves the direction of the head and eyes. Sometimes, however, the spouses also organize their heads and the upper parts of their bodies in a display of disengagement by **turning away**. Consider Extract 4. The therapist asked the wife to comment upon the husband's earlier talk about the couple's problems, or to introduce another potentially problematic issue (lines 1–6). The wife returned to yet another topic that the husband raised earlier and formulated it twice as "we don't understand each other" (lines 8 and 10). Thereafter she moved on to an account of her total misunderstanding of her husband's laughter (lines 11–14); this account implied that there was something wrong in the husband's way of expressing his emotions. The complaint, which

in line 8–14 was expressed indirectly, became explicit as the wife, in lines 15–16, shifted the topic onto her own suffering and pointed out in a crying voice (indicated by ~ signs) that the husband's emotional inaccessibility made it impossible for her to react. Furthermore, in line 25, she disclosed her consequent loneliness. At the beginning of the wife's answer, the husband was looking passively away, ahead of himself. He started to turn to the right, away from the wife, in line 7, gradually directing his head to the right and down. Finally, in line 8, he reached a position where he was turned away and looking down (see Frame 3). The husband remained in this position throughout the wife's account, until line 16 when the wife began to explicate her suffering. During the process of turning further away (lines 8 and 9), the husband also exhaled audibly and clenched his jaw.

Extract 4



Frame 3: Turning away

01 T: Jeszcze chciałam zapytać pani. (.) wizja. (.)  
I would like to ask you. what is your opinion. (.)

02 na to< na temat tej sprawy  
on this< regarding this issue

((three lines omitted))

06 czy Pani chce, i o innej rzeczy jeszcze powiedzieć.  
or would you like to tell about different issue.

07 W: To znaczy ja chciałam wrócić do tego co małżon+ekś jeszcze  
it means I would+like return to this what husband just  
Well I would like to re+turn to this what the hus+ba+nd

w: points to H \$-----\$  
h: turning head gradually to the right and down+-->

08 wcześniej [mówił erhm: o tym &{2e: y:: myś +się nie rozumiemy  
mentioned earlier erhm: tha:t t erm:: we don't understand each other  
h: clenching jaw &-----& +--> fully turned away

09 H: [.hhhhhhh [#####

10 że (.) no >-bo\* się nie rozumiemy taka jest prawda.< .hhh  
because we >-don't\* understand each other that's the truth.< .hhh  
\* Frame 3

11 Y:: Ja w zeszłym roku (1.0) dopiero pierwszy raz po osiemnastu  
Ermh:: Only last year (1.0) for the first time after eighteen

12 latach małżeństwa zauważyłam że jak małżonek się śmieje  
years of marriage I noticed that while the husband is laughing

13 to nie znaczy że on się śmieje, (2.0) on się śmieje, (2.0)  
it doesn't mean that he is laughing, (2.0) he is laughing, (2.0)

14 ale on gotuje w środku. >rozumie pani<?  
but he is boiling inside. >do you(f) understand<?

15 T: że jest napięcie w środku którego mąż nie ujawnia.  
it means the tension exists inside which the husband doesn't dis+close.

16 W: Dokładnie tak. (1.0) .hh tego #nie ~widzę. (3.0) więc  
Exactly so I this #don't ~see so  
Exactly so. (1.0) .hh I don't #see ~this. (3.0) so  
h: #lifts up head, passive looking away

17 W: nie mam możliwości (1.5) jakiejś reakcji~  
I have no possibility to (0.5) to react in any way~  
((7 lines omitted))

25 W: to jest ta (2.0) uhm to jest moja samotność.  
This is the (2.0) uhm this is my loneliness.

By turning away from the speaker, the partner in Extract 4 showed disengagement in an active way: he visibly did something to display turning his attention and perception away from the speaker.

Hands are used in various practices of disengagement. In our data, the spouses sometimes used their hand/s as a barrier. In Extract 5 below, the therapist in line 1 asked the husband to describe his perspective of the couple's problems. The husband responded by naming a "sexual problem" as the main problem (line 5). From line 6

onwards, he then elaborated on the problem, first pointing out that the expanding dysfunction had caused frustration and suppressed anger in him (line 07–08), and eventually formulating his wife's lack of arousal as destructive to his potency. Thereby the responsibility for the sexual problems in the marriage was allocated to the wife. During the question, the wife was looking down at the spectacles she had in her hands on her lap. In the silence before the onset of the answer (line 2), the husband changed his position in the chair, and the wife glanced at him, then returned her gaze down to the spectacles. She placed them on her chair at the beginning of the husband's answer (line 3). After moving the spectacles, the wife continued her hand and arm movements, lifting her right hand toward her face (line 3). As soon as her hand reached the level of her face, she started to rub her face with the hand (line 4). When the husband's sentence construction reached the point where he was going to name the problem, the wife placed her hand on the edge of her face, so that it was positioned between her face and the husband, and continued to delicately touch the side of her face (line 4; Frame 4). The hand remained there during the husband's description of his frustration and anger. Disengagement here involved separating the wife from the speaker by blocking visual access. She also provided a tactile experience while the husband was speaking (see the section on self-touch below). Eventually, in line 09, as the husband moved toward the description of their sexual situation, the wife moved her hand to cover her face, a practice that is described below in Extract 9.

Extract 5 [B1 PF Husband 0.16-1.03]



Frame 4: Hand as barrier

01 T: Pani Jarosławie jak to jest z pana perspektywy.  
Mr Jaroslaw how is it from your perspective.

02 (6.0) ((H changes position; W glances shortly at H))

03 H: No głównym \$problemem hhh ee:\$ +od początku+  
Well the main \$problem hhh erm::\$ +from the beginning+  
w: \$-----\$places spectacles on table  
w: lifts hand close to face +-----+

04 +jaki był to właśnie je+\$st yy\*::  
that was it just it is  
+was that it is just+ \$a erm\*::  
w:--rubbing face-----\$--> hand as barrier  
\*Frame 4

05 (0.4) mhm (.) mh problem seksualny .hhh (1.0) ermh:  
(0.4) mhm (.) mh sexual problem .hhh (1.0) ermh:

06 to się nam na na kilku p- płaszczyznach i (.) ee rozkła:dał  
this was on on several a- areas and (.) erm was expanding

07 i:: na każdej z nich powodował we mnie frustrację i (1.0)  
and:: on each of them it caused frustration in me and (1.0)

08 i: tłumioną złość. hmh znaczy (1.0) mmm (2.0) sytuacje  
and: suppressed anger. hmh it means (1.0) mmm (2.0) situations

09 kiedy dochodziło do #eee do e jakiegoś seksu: to (0.5)  
where there happened #erm some e sex: that (0.5)  
w: #moves hand to cover face

10 ee w czasie (1.0) yy: s tośunku żona często traciła  
erm during (1.0) erm: intercourse wife often was losing

11 w ogóle.hhh podniecenie  
totally .hhh arousal  
((3 lines omitted))

15 co w jakiś tam sposób zabijało poten+cję.  
what in some way was killing pote+ncy.

Sometimes the spouses look at their own hand while the other spouse describes problems that implicate them. Extract 6 below shows the same moment that was shown in Extract 1. What the husband says in lines 03–06 is inferable as a complaint about the

wife promising sex and not actually giving it. During the early part of the extract, the wife was holding her right hand next to her face as a barrier between herself and the husband. When the husband was approaching the key point of the complaint, the wife dropped her hand to a position in front of her (line 5), and while he actually uttered the key point (line 6) the wife was looking at her hand (seemingly her fingernails; see Frame 5). By looking at her hand, the wife showed that her attention was now, at least partially, on something other than the husband's talk (For a continuation of this interaction, see Extract 10, lines 24–32).

#### Extract 6 [B1 Combine practice]



Frame 5: Looking at hand

01 T: Co to znaczy problemy z kommunikacja?  
What does it mean problems with communication?  
w: >>> hand as barrier

02 (2.5)

03 H: hmm no (2.0) no wiaśnie (1.0) #mm:# (1.0) to z jednej strony  
hmm well (2.0) that's the point (1.0) #mm:# (1.0) on the one hand

04 taka kommunikacja >że że< hmm: jest cały czas (.)  
such communication >that that< hmm: all the time (.)

05 j::akaaś .hhh jakaś jakiś \$jakieś  
the::re is .hhh a kind kind kind of\$  
w: \$-----\$ drops hand to front of her face

06 Sobi\*ecanie czegoś  
pro\*missing of something ((continues))  
w:\$--> Looking at hand  
\*Frame 5

Apart from looking at hands, the unspeaking targets of complaints also **play with their hands or objects in their hands**. In Extract 7 below, the husband talked about his view regarding the wife's conflictual relationship with their little son. Before the segment, the wife had described her inability to manage emotions evoked by her son's misbehavior, which led her to hit him. She also claimed to be more decisive in relation to their children than the husband, which implied a complaint against the husband. In line 1, the therapist asked the husband about his understanding of the situation. The husband started playing down the importance of the wife's "decisiveness" in the matter (lines 2–4). Thereafter he hesitantly described what he considered a key issue: the son running away from the mother when her decisiveness turned into rejection (lines 6–8). The complaint involved the husband converting the wife's potentially positive self-attribution (being decisive) into a negative one (rejecting the child). In the beginning of the extract, the wife blew her nose and wiped it with a tissue (lines 1–2). She then put the tissue in her bag (line 4). At the moment when husband was approaching disclosure of his view of the problem (line 5), the wife started to look at her hands and to play with them (see Frame 6). This created the impression of a side involvement (Goffman, 1963) with the hands. The wife remained in this position, playing with her hands, until the end of Extract 8, and also after that, as the husband described the son's confusion and his own frustration as a result of the wife's rejecting behavior toward the son (data not shown).

#### Extract 7 [C1 31:00]



Frame 6: Playing with hands

01 T: a pan też (0.5) takie ma (.) rozumienie (.) tej sytuacji?  
and do you also (0.5) have such (.) understanding (.) of the situation?  
w:>>> blowing her nose-----\$

02 H: hhhhhh znaczy, tak, wydał się mi się (.)  
hhhhhh I mean, well, it seems to me (.)  
w: -----+ wiping her nose

03 że to może to nie jest. że że żona jest  
maybe it isn't, her being

04 stanowcza tylko że+ (0.5) y: bo bo ja+  
decisive but:+ (0.5) y: well well because I+ (4.0)  
w:puts tissue in bag +-----+

05 bo\$ (1.0) ((click)) (4.0)  
because\$ (1.0) ((click)) (4.0)  
w: \$--> plays with hands

06 \*ucieka w sytuacjach w których stanowczość się przeradza  
\*he runs away from in situations when decisiveness turns into  
\*Frame 6

07 już czas- (1.0) >tak jak żona powiedziała< zda- zdarza się to  
sometime- even (1.0) >as the wife said< it ha- happens

08 bardzo rzadko .hh ale przeradza się już w jakieś: (.) odrzuć  
very rarely .hh but it turns into kind of: (.) rejection

Yet another activity of the hands is **self-touch**. It involves touching, rubbing, stroking, caressing, or fiddling with the person's own body (Harrigan, 1985). Self-touch can be done also by body parts other than hands, for example, the lips, tongue, or feet. In Extract 8, the husband was talking about having been "terrified" (line 1) when his wife was "going through" (line 2) something which transpired as an "apogee" (line 3) of emotional disturbances that the husband characterized as "this dreadful mess" (line 5). There was a temporary change of direction in the husband's account in line 3, where he pointed out that at the time that he was talking about, the "apogee" was actually getting less intense. Yet, the complaint was crystallized by the description "dreadful mess" (line 05), which conveyed non-acceptance. When the husband uttered the word "terrified" (line 1), the wife started to clench her lips. Almost at the same moment, the husband turned his gaze to the wife, remaining oriented to her until the end of line 1; the wife however did not reciprocate the gaze. While the husband coughed and then paused in line 2, at the point where it was clear that he was going to name what he was terrified of, the wife lifted her hand to her mouth and started to press her clenched lips with her fingers (see Frame 7). She continued this pressing until the end of the extract. This created an effect of auto-involvement (Goffman, 1963) that occurred alongside the husband's talk, and it thereby contributed to disengagement from the husband's talk.

#### Extract 8 [B 2.1 PF Husband 0.20-0.30]



Frame 7: Self touch

01 H: ja byłem przerażony to \$ (0.2) dwa lata temu\$  
I was terrified so it \$ (0.2) two years ago\$  
h: gazing W 5-----\$  
w: clenching lips & -->

02 H: krh-hm (0.6) ś (0.4) #to# Helena miała ja\*kieś takie dosyć  
krh-hm (0.6) ś (0.4) #at# that time Helen was going through such  
w:lifting hands\$--> pressing her clenched lips  
\*Frame 7

03 >znaczy ś schodziło ci apogee  
>I mean< ś it was getting less intense this apogee  
h: \$--> gazing W

04 zdaje się tego .hhh y: tej  
what seems to be the .hhh y: of this

05 tej tej strasznej sieczki,  
this this dreadful mess,

Finally, we have practices of disengagement in which the positioning of hand, body, and the blocking of the visual field coincide. This happens in the practice of **covering one's face**. Consider Extract 9. The husband was complaining about the wife's behavior toward him, apparently for her having said something very offensive about him regarding sex. As the husband was referring to "it" in line 2 and 3 (in line 1 in the original Polish), the wife intervened in line 4 by saying "it means sex", apparently challenging the husband's indirect way of talking. During this challenge, the spouses gazed at each other for a while (lines 4 and 5), after which they both looked down and to the front. In lines 5 and 6, the husband first confirmed the wife's correction, then (line 6) signaled the continuation of his complaining talk by uttering "erm::". After that, the wife audibly breathed out and lifted her hand and covered her face. Immediately thereafter, the husband continued his complaining talk by talking about his loss of desire to have sex (lines 8 and 10). During this talk, the wife continued to cover her face with her left hand and leant her head down toward the hand (see Frame 8).

Extract 9 [B 2.1 PF Couple 0.46-0.57]



Frame 8: Covering face

```

01 H: .hhh m:: (1.5) ponieważ Helena to (0.4)
      .hhh m:: (1.5) because Helena (0.4)
02 W: taki sposób (.) określiła i w taki sposób
      in: such a way (.) described it and in such a way
03 Y: przedstawiła? (0.5) *znaczy*,
      Y: portrayed it? (0.5) *it means*,
04 W: To >Sto znaczy seks< mówmy [po imieniu$ ( ) żeby było jasne
      It >sit means sex< let's [call it by its name$ ( ) to be clear
      W: $-----$ looking H
      H: $-----$ looking W
05 H: [seks tak nasze pożycie ( ) tak seks
      [sex yes our sex life ( ) yes sex
06 .hh jasne (1.0) e:::
      .hh sure (1.0) erm:::
07 W: $hhhh$
      $---$ lifts hand
      $--> covers face till the end of the transcript
08 H: no >że mi się odech*ciało< po prostu
      well >that I just didn't feel like it any*more< simply
      *Frame 8
09 T: Mhm mhm
10 H: Czyli (.) dostałem takiego: (.) kopa między nogi
      So (.) I received such a: (.) kick between my legs
  
```

In Extract 9, the spouse who covered her face also displayed disengagement from the other spouse's talk. She obstructed her visual view, created a tactile sensation as a side involvement, and oriented her posture downwards, away from the speaking spouse next to her. Covering the face could be characterized as a "synthetic" practice of disengagement, as it involved also what we called turning away and self-touch.

#### 4.4. Disengagement as anticipation

In all extracts shown above, there was an observable coordination between the talk of one spouse that attributed problems to the

other, and the particular practices of bodily disengagement by this other spouse. At the emergence of disengagement practices, a shift to complaining talk or intensification of the complaint could be anticipated. Sometimes the spouse was engaged with the speaker before the emergence of the particular bodily practice of disengagement, but in other cases, the spouse was employing another practice before the emergence of the focal disengagement practice. Passive looking-away seems to be a "baseline" practice of disengagement that is not directly associated with shifts in the speaking spouse's talk. In other practices, it seems that the spouses start their disengagement practices in moments in the other spouse's talk when the complaint or its intensification is just about to emerge, but has not yet emerged. So, in Extract 4, the husband started to turn away at the point where the wife had just indicated that she would be talking about a problematic issue mentioned by him before. In Extract 5 the wife started to raise her hand when her husband had just indicated that he would be describing "the main problem", and she placed her hand as a barrier at the moment when the husband began to explicate what this problem was. In Extract 6, the wife started to raise her hand when the husband's talk indicated that he would be complaining, and at the same time when he uttered the key description of the complaint ("promising"), the wife started to look at her hand. In Extract 7, the wife started to play with her hands at the moment the husband pointed out that the problematic issue was not the wife's decisiveness, thus signposting that he would talk about something else at the heart of the problem (which then turned out to be rejection of the son). In Extract 8, the wife started to press her lips at the moment the husband made clear that he would be talking about an event in the couple's life that had terrified him. In Extract 9, the wife started to lift her hand to cover her face at the moment when the spouses had made it clear that the husband was complaining about the wife's way of portraying their sexual life.

The participants of couple therapy are married or cohabiting couples who have a long history of relationship troubles. It is reasonable to think that they have been through talks about their problems numerous times, and that they also know what their spouses consider as problematic. So, it seems that the timing of the practices of disengagement involves *anticipation* of the direction of talk toward an emergence or the intensification of a complaint. The practices of disengagement emerge when this direction is observable for the non-speaking spouse.

#### 4.5. Display of disengagement as engagement

We have argued that disengagement behaviors are, in an anticipatory way, linked to the complaints that the speakers convey regarding their spouses. Disengagement behaviors convey that the target of the complaint is not fully attending to the spouse's talk and not fully involved in the activity at hand. In this sequential and institutional context, there emerges a paradox of disengagement: the persons who show their inattention through disengagement behaviors do so in a particular moment in the context of particular (complaining) talk. They are in perceptual proximity to the other participants (the spouse and the therapist), so they know that these



others are able to see whatever they do, and that they will associate their behaviors with what the other spouse is saying. The content of their partner’s talk involves intimate or emotional issues that concern them as a partner. Furthermore, they are institutionally obliged to remain in the position of listener. Thus, while claiming inattention and lack of involvement, disengagement behaviors paradoxically indicate their producer’s *attention* and *stance* to the talk and the other participants. We could say that the performance of disengagement, in this context, is a particular way of engaging. Viewing disengagement behaviors in this way matches with the theory of inter-corporeality (Loenhoff, 2017; Fuchs, 2018). Looking and turning one’s body away, being involved in other activities, objects, and sensations, blocking one’s perceptual context to the speaker: these are all embodied ways of perceiving, evaluating, and acting upon the complaints about them.

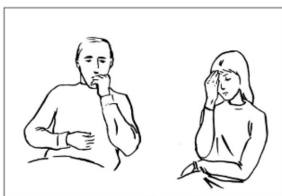
### 4.6. Extended disengagement

Up until now, we have examined cases where the spouse withdrew from engagement at a particular point in time. Even though we haven’t been able to show all instances at length, in these cases, the disengaged participants mostly returned to engagement after a limited period of disengagement. There were instances in our data, however, where the disengaged spouse stayed in disengagement for a longer period of time. In such cases, the actual practices of disengagement could be altered during the disengagement. For such a case, consider Extract 10 below.

**Extract 10** [B1 Combine practice]

01 T: nie mamy już dużo czasu  
 we don't have a+lot+of time left

02 i chciałbym zapytać jakie państwo (0.5)  
 and I would like to ask you what are your (pl) (0.5)



Frame 9

03 macie oczekiwania od tera\*pii takie (1.0) jak tam.  
 expectations from the therapy such (1.0) like there.



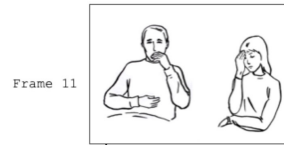
Frame 10

04 (10.0)\*(7.0)

05 H: chciałbym żeby było po części się rozwiązały  
 I would like it to be that partially

06 jakieś takie właśnie problemy z (1.0)  
 some kind of problems would solve themselves with (1.0)

08 .hhh (0.5) hhh z taką komunikacją z[::]  
 .hhh (0.5) hhh with such communication with[::]  
 w: hand to the right side of face-->



Frame 11

09 (3.0)\*(3.0)

10 >chociaż no< nie ukrywam że bardzo zależy mi na tym  
 >although< I won't hide that it is important to me



Frame 12

11 żeby te se- +s- sf- sfery seksualne \*.hhh  
 that these se- +s- sf- sexual spheres \*.hhh  
 w: +-->turning away from H,  
 holding hand next to face

12 (2.0)

13 ta sfera eeh (0.5) była jakoś nie wiem (.)  
 this sphere eeh (0.5) would be somehow I don't know (.)

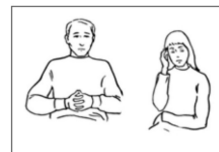
14 rozpracowana czy czy czy (0.5) mhm.  
 worked out or or or (0.5) mhm.

15 (4.5)

16 T: Co to znaczy problemy z komunikacją?  
 What does it mean problems with communication?

17 (2.5)

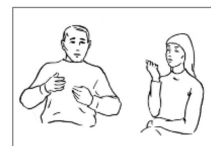
18 H: hhm #no::# (2.0) +no właśnie (1.0) #mm:# (1.0) to z jednej strony  
 hhm #well::# (2.0) +that's the point (1.0) #mm:# (1.0) on the one hand  
 w: +--> opening palm, touching temple with fingers,  
 thus positioning hand as a barrier



Frame 13

19 taka \*komunikacja >że że< hhm: jest cały czas (.)  
 such \*communication >that that< hhm: all the time (.)

20 j::akaś .hhh jakaś jakiś jakieś  
 the::re is .hhh a kind kind kind of



Frame 14



Frame 15

21 +obiecanie\* czegoś coś powiedzieć\*enie (.)  
 +promising\* of something saying something (.)  
 w: +--hand to front, gazing fingers-->+circulating hand  
 towards face



Frame 16

22 typu +zaraz:: (.) i i i\* i za tym tak naprawdę  
 like any minute:: (.) and and and and there is truly  
 w: +-->moving hand to front, looking at fingernails




Frame 17

23 +nic nie nic nie id:zie\*  
 +nothing nothing that would follow it\*  
 w: +-->rests her head on her fist and passively looks away


24 T: czyli z pana perspektywy ta sfera intymna  
so from your perspective this intimate sphere

25 to jest tak jakby kluczowa centralna=  
it is somehow key central=

26 H: =znaczy to też +nie tylko  
 =It means this also [but not only  
 w: +-->starts to turn away from H



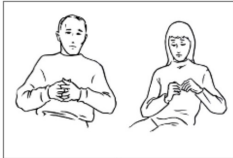
Frame 18



Frame 19

27 też nie \*mówię o::::: o +o tym\*  
this\* also I'm not speaking about [about this  
 w: +turned fully away from H

28 ale głównie się to z tym tym wiazalo [ale  
but mainly with this this it was connected [but  
 w: lifting hands;gazing fingernails;playing with them [->



Frame 20

29 ale no i i .hhh ee \*nie wiem  
but well and .hhh ee \*I don't know

30 ja mam też bardzo dużo skumulowanej złości i ee  
I also have a+lot+of cumulative anger and ee

31 i w stosunku innych ludzi  
and towards other people

32 i w stosunku do do do żony  
and towards towards the wife

in different variations and combinations that we described above: passive looking-away (most clearly in Frames 12, 17), turning away (Frames 18 and 19), hand/s as a barrier (Frames 11, 13), looking at her own hands (Frames 14, 16), playing with her hands (Frame 20), self-touch (Frames 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17), and covering one's own face (Frames 9 and 10). The participants entered this segment from a spate of talking in which the husband had already been complaining about the wife (data not shown), and the segment itself involved further complaints. The wife's displays of disengagement were coordinated to the momentary shifts in the husband's talk. For example, in line 11, when the husband had indicated (by the aborted "se-") that he was not going to hide that "sex" was an important thing for him, the wife turned away from him; and in line 20, when the husband had started a complaint (by the descriptor "all the time" in line 19) and was about to name the target of the complaint (by having said "there is kind of kind of"), the wife moved her hand and started to look at her fingernails (Frame 16). However, not every single shift between practices of disengagement seemed to be linked to distinct anticipatory prompts in the husband's talk. Rather, it appears that the continuum of practices of disengagement constituted a prolonged, continued withdrawal from the interaction. The prolonged withdrawal was, as it were, the wife's response to the expected continuation of the complaining talk.

While the wife's practices of disengagement constituted a continuous, prolonged withdrawal, a general shift in the "Gestalt" of these practices could still be observed. In the beginning part of the segment (up until frame 13/line 19), the disengagement practices involved primarily creating physical barriers between herself and her husband, who was speaking. Self-touch and covering the face were associated with this barrier maintenance. During the latter part of the segment, however, the wife displayed disengagement in a more comprehensive way, not only avoiding visual contact with the husband, but also focusing on a competing object of visual attention, i.e., a side involvement. By playing with her hands and looking at her fingernails, she seemed to convey that there was something else on her mind other than the husband's talk. Yet, for the participants and for the analyst alike, it was obvious that the competing visual attention did not preclude the wife hearing the husband's talk. Therefore, the display of side-involvement was to be understood also as displaying a negative stance toward what the husband was saying. Likewise, the wife's turning away from the husband (Frames 18–19) was very pronounced, as it was ostensive, and thereby also an active stance display. Interestingly, the wife's practices of creating a physical barrier were displayed while the husband was conveying that a difficult subject was about to emerge and then naming it on a general level ("sexual spheres", line 11). On the other hand, the more active and comprehensive displays of disengagement seemed to be prompted by direct blaming.

## 5. Discussion

In this paper, we have described the disengagement behaviors performed in a particular sequential and institutional context, which paradoxically indicates the engagement of non-speaking participants. We showed this phenomenon through detailed analysis of non-verbal dynamics in complaint sequences in couple therapy: how the co-present targets responded to complaints that their spouses delivered and addressed to the therapist in couple therapy first

Before this extract, the participants had been discussing the couple's reasons for not having children, and the husband had been attributing much of the reason to the wife (her difficulties with sex and her lack of contribution to the couple's finances). The wife had been physically disengaged during most of this talk. In line 01–03, the therapist changed the topic with a question about expectations of the therapy. Throughout the question, the wife remained in the position where she was previously: covering part of her face with her hand (see Frame 10, line 03).

The therapist addressed his question to both spouses (using the second-person plural *państwo*; line 2). A long silence ensued (line 4), before the husband answered by expressing a wish that problems with communication would solve themselves (lines 5–8). In lines 10–14, he then somewhat hesitantly expressed his hope that sexual problems would also be worked out. As shown earlier in Extracts 1 and 6, the therapist made a request to specify the "problems of communication" that the husband had first referred to (line 16); in response, the husband delivered an indirect but (yet in this context) inferable complaint about the wife's empty promises regarding sex (17–22). The peak of the complaint was in lines 21–22, where the husband seemingly cited the wife promising intimacy at "any minute", but in fact "nothing, nothing" followed. In line 23, the therapist asked the husband to confirm whether the intimate sphere was central for him; the husband partially confirmed this (line 25), but also hesitantly added another area of problems: his anger at other people and at his wife (26–31).

During this exchange initiated by the therapist's question, the wife adopted various postures with her body, hands, and gaze. The postures she adopted involved all the practices of disengagement

sessions. We argued that the institutionalized turn-taking system of couple therapy effectively blocks the “ordinary” verbal response that the subject of a complaint would likely give (see Wilkinson et al., 2023). Instead, the complained-about spouses displayed their stance to the ongoing complaint through their body (gaze direction, hand movements, and body posture). We identified seven recurring bodily practices, which in different ways embodied inattention to the complaining talk, or competing objects of action and attention relative to the talk. The practices partially overlap, so that elements of one practice can be incorporated into another: for example, *Playing with hands or objects* typically incorporates *Looking at hands*; and *Covering the face* typically incorporates *Self-touch* and *Turning away*. In our data, the complained-about parties typically started disengagement behaviors in an anticipatory way, in moments when the complaint was projected, i.e., when the spouse was approaching a point in their talk where a complaint would be delivered. The anticipatory disengagement behaviors showed yet another paradox: attentiveness performed through signs of inattention. We also argued that sometimes disengagement behaviors were “chained” during longer segments of complaining talk, resulting in a long spate of displays of disengagement, where a new phase of complaining could be anticipated by a shift in the disengagement behavior.

We could ask: why would someone display disengagement as a response to a complaint? Responding in conversation, be it verbal or non-verbal, normally conveys engagement. Even if the participants do not talk, they can, in principle, use their body in other ways: making faces, making gestures conveying disapproval, even walking away from the therapy office. The interactional rationale of displays of disengagement may arise from their paradoxical affordances.

Displays of disengagement are not actions in the overt and accountable sense. They do not document an intention to communicate. Yet, paradoxically, they are events within the encounter, and are most likely perceived by the co-participants. By indexing inattention and a lack of involvement, we might say practices of disengagement convey in a most indirect and unaccountable way that “I am not collaborating as a hearer of what is now being said about me”. By not collaborating, the disengaging persons, paradoxically, show their emotional stance toward the complaint. Therefore, displays of disengagement involve, so to say, “responding without responding”, “attention through inattention”, or even “engaging through disengagement”. We indicated that these phenomena arise particularly in sequential and institutional contexts, involving complaining talk about a co-present participant (intimate partner) that concerns intimate or emotional issues, while the target of the complaint is subject to an institutional obligation to remain in the position of listener.

## 5.1. Limitations and direction for future research

The fact that our videos do not show the therapists is a key limitation of the study. Knowing the physical setting of the study, we can infer when the speaker’s gaze is directed toward the therapist. Yet, the therapists’ gaze is inaccessible for us.

Conversation analysis typically focuses on overt behaviors in sequences of action and avoids references to the psychological or other properties of the interaction-participants. Recently, however, some researchers have also started to investigate the linkages between

interactional and psychological processes (see, e.g., Peräkylä et al., 2015; DeLand, 2021). Interactional engagement is a topic where the exploration of such linkages might be relevant. It is to be expected that being a target of a complaint prompts negative emotional arousal in the hearer, as their self-image is then at stake. Within the interaction research tradition, it was Goffman (1955), p. 214; who acknowledged the emotional consequences of threats to self-image: the participant’s “manner and bearing may falter, collapse and crumble. He may become embarrassed and chagrined: he may become shamefaced”. Future research could take its departure from a hypothesis that the practices of engagement involve an effort to manage such negative emotional arousal. This would not mean to reduce the meaning of interactional practices into psychological processes. Rather, we could assume that the “internal” regulation of emotions and the management of interaction processes intertwine, so that the same practices can serve in internal regulation and in the management of interactions (Beebe and Lachmann, 2002). Three types of research design could help in clarifying the role of disengagement behaviors in emotion regulation. One would be to measure physiological responses indicative of emotional arousal during sequences of complaints and disengagement (cf. Peräkylä et al., 2015); another would be to investigate disengagement behaviors in couples suffering from conditions associated with difficulties with emotion regulation (such as borderline personality disorder; Soloff, 2018); the third would be to elicit participants’ accounts of subjective experiences in relation to disengagement behaviors during complaint sequences (cf. Janusz and Peräkylä, 2020).

## Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the dataset involves video recordings of couple therapy sessions. Such clinical materials cannot be shared with third parties. On request, we can provide anonymized transcripts of the sessions. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to BJa: [bernadetta.janusz@uj.edu.pl](mailto:bernadetta.janusz@uj.edu.pl).

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Bio-Ethical Committee, Medical College, Jagiellonian University no. 1072.6120.76.2020. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

AP: designing the study, data analysis, supervision of data analysis, and writing the article. BT: data analysis and writing the article. KD-W and BJó: data analysis. MF and FM: data collection and data analysis. BJa: designing the study, data collection, data analysis, and writing the article. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

## Funding

The research was funded by Academy of Finland grants 319113 and 320248.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The reviewer MB declared a past collaboration with the author AP to the handling editor.

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