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From Helping to Hurting in Counselling.
Two Narratives

The article discusses informal counselling in friendly relationships. Two narratives borrowed from the media (television and the Internet) are used to illustrate the phenomenon. One of them, an animated film for children, depicts a way of organizing friendly assistance. The other one is an episode from an Internet discussion forum. They trigger reflection on counsellogy and questions about the quality and significance of non-professional counselling. Unintentionally, they also reflect/epitomise 'violent counselling'. In interpreting and describing this type of counselling, the method of text analysis in media discourse has been applied.

Key words: counselling, support, violence, informal counselling, critical discourse analysis

Informal, incidental counselling is observably increasing on daily basis nowadays (Siarkiewicz 2010). More and more commonly, people who support those in trouble are not prepared for such work in the same way as psychologists, psychotherapists or trained counsellors. Amateurs (self-appointed gurus, religious teachers, etc.) are, indeed, becoming leaders in providing support; the same concerns also 'common people' (neighbours, friends, acquaintances). The friendly, non-professional support seems an interesting research field. My analysis here focuses on texts presenting two situations of a (quasi)-counselling character. They have inspired my reflection on counselling, in particular on the quality and significance of non-professional counselling. Unintentionally, they have also become illustrations of what I will hereafter refer to as *violent counselling*. 'Defective help' has already been studied by pedagogues, counselling scholars and even andragogues (Holt 2009, Czerkawska 2009, Kargul 2004). Alicja Czerkawska metaphorically describes the potentially harmful kinds of counselling activities as the 'dark zone', indicating that they are often latent and remain undiscussed. Analysing advisors' unethical activities and other unsettling counselling practices, Czerkawska points out two risk areas – abuse and neglect. The former pertains to counsellors' actions that exceed their professional competences or involve violence towards help-seekers. The latter pertains

to actions resulting from counsellors' inadequate preparation for their helping role (Czerkawska 2009, pp. 34-47).

Józef Kargul also highlights hazards that a counselling relationship can involve. He mentions such disturbing practices as counsellors' attempts to restructure the counselees' value system ('values counselling'), triggering improper behaviours by faulty counselling, and reinforcing a client's passive attitude. The author indicates several factors conducive to such dangers, including the ubiquity of counselling (Kargul 2004, pp. 49-54).

All the aforementioned works refer to formal counselling, offered by individuals professionally prepared for the task (advisors, instructors, supervisors, teachers), i.e. those who influence organisation of the helping process in various counselling institutions. In contrast, I have chosen to analyse informal relationships – friendly, non-professional interactions which, nevertheless, aspire to be 'assistive'. I discuss them on the basis of two media broadcasts: narratives from television and the Internet. One of them – an animated film for children – describes a method of organising friendly assistance. In the other – an Internet discussion forum exchange – an Internet user seeks her 'virtual friends' assistance in solving her problem. To scrutinise both narratives as media texts, I apply techniques grounded in *critical discourse analysis* (CDA).

Studying the media texts

Critical discourse analysis is a widely applied, highly diversified research method. In her study, Małgorzata Lisowska-Magdziarz (2006) highlights this diversity. In her opinion, CAD is grounded in the formalist tradition and relies, in the functional dimension, on the Habermasian theory of communicative action, as well as on Michel Foucault's theories. Each of these perspectives defines discourse differently and proposes a slightly different methodology.[1] However, there is a critical consensus that *'CAD concerns neither language nor discourse itself, but rather components of social discursive processes (such as relations, systems, structures)'* (Fairclouh, Duszak 2008, p. 15). It is nothing unusual that recently the interest in this method has been increasing among representatives of other social sciences, including sociologists, psychologists, and even political scientists. Media scholars, as well

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[1] CAD in the formal sense examines the internal organisation and structure of linguistic behaviour (here language is studied in separation from the situational context). In the functional sense, CAD focuses on both language and its user. In this sense, the purpose of investigations is to explore the unconscious or hidden prejudices and stereotypes in the linguistic behaviour of individuals, groups, or institutions. CAD in the context of the Habermasian theory of communicative action addresses the linguistic practices of people that can influence changes in social life. CAD grounded in M. Foucalult's theories understands discourse in broader terms: as interrelationships between language and ideology, knowledge, social and communicative strategies, shaped by power-knowledge relations (Lisowska-Magdziarz 2006).

as media communication specialists, have also eagerly begun to apply it. Consequently, a form of media and media-related discourse analysis has come into being.

Two ways of comprehending and approaching this method can be distinguished in the literature. In the broader perspective, discourse analysis is regarded as a separate field of social science, with its own theories, subjects, rules, methods and research techniques. In the slightly narrower perspective, discourse analysis is a set of research techniques and procedures to study and describe individual fragments of reality. In this paper, I adopt the latter definition and resort to a solution proposed by the Dutch linguist, Teun van Dijk (2001).

Apart from the already mentioned narratives, many other ones can be studied by means of critical discourse analysis. They are: 1) the daily and periodical press coverages, 2) television and radio programmes, Internet content, 3) posters and billboards, 4) personal documents (letters, diaries, curricula vitae), 5) official documents (announcements, declarations, instructions, formal addresses), 6) journalistic texts (news, reportage, interviews, opinion pieces), 7) non-journalistic materials used by the media (people's utterances, songs, horoscopes, chat rooms, Internet forums, e-mail, blogs, memoirs), 8) propaganda and political advertisements, 9) marketing materials (Lisowska-Magdziarz 2006, p. 30).

Analysis of the media discourse texts offers many research opportunities, opens up space for new interpretations and creates interesting investigation possibilities. With CAD expanding beyond linguistic analysis, social problems and issues have also come within its scope. One of them is informal counselling 'performed' in friendly interactions and in the media addressed in this paper. From CAD's entire interpretive store, I have chosen one 'investigative tool', known as the *triad* of Teun van Dijk. In Van Dijk's opinion, the basis of discourse as a communicative event is constituted by three main elements: use of language, communication of ideas and interaction in social situations. This *triad* is inherently interdisciplinary, since each of its elements is analysed by a different science, as Figure 1 shows:

Figure 1. Tools of discourse analysis (the *triad* of Teun van Djik)
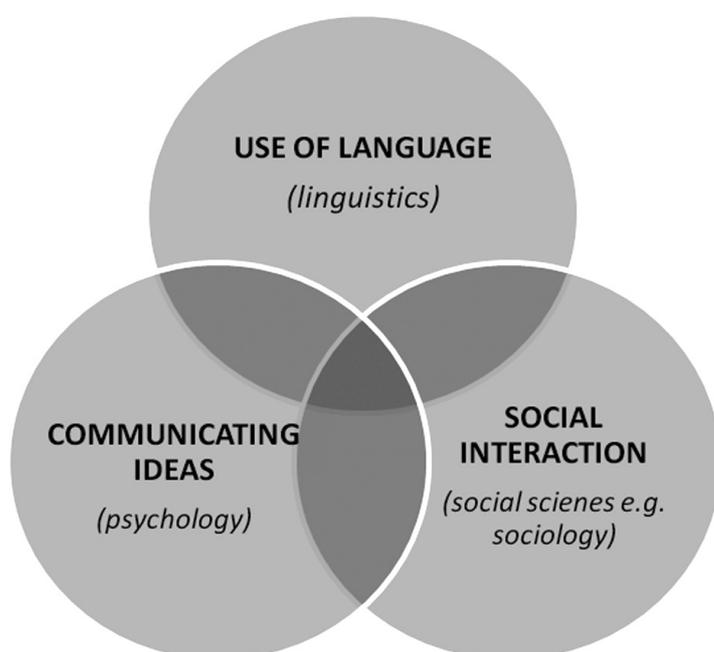
Source: own work.

The linguistic perspective foregrounds the analysis of language itself and the form in which it is used. The psychological framework investigates and analyses beliefs, attitudes and the communication methods of the studied subjects. The sociological paradigm focuses on people's reciprocal influences in the analysed social situations. Although each of them (language, idea, interaction) can be analysed separately, M. Lisowskiej-Magdziarz believes that 'discourse analysis undertakes to describe all three of these dimensions of communication in an integrated manner. In describing the content and social impact of the modern media, none of the three aspects can be overlooked' (Lisowskia-Magdziarz 2006, p. 10). Thus, all the dimensions of communication come into focus of counsellogy.

This is why my analysis takes into account each of the three elements of the *triad*. Approaching both narratives, I start from a **language** analysis. I explore the way in which it is used, as well as identify expressions denoting the counselling and assisting nature of utterances. Thus, in analysing the anonymous film, I focus on the main characters' utterances as well as on the visual features of the scenes. In the case of the virtual conversations, I concentrate on comments written on the forum and the text signs expressive of the Internet users' moods (emoticons). Subsequently, I identify the leading thought, that is the **idea** determining the goal and direction of actions undertaken in the analysed situation. Thus, I establish what kind of non-verbal message is received by its participants. What solutions are proposed to them? What goal can they really achieve? I also scrutinise **interaction**, i.e. the way

in which the subjects in the analysed events affect one another – how they communicate, behave and react in this particular situation. I determine whether any modifications are observable in their behaviour. My analysis results do not follow the order of the Teun van Dijk triad's elements, yet each of them is discernible in both narratives.

Narrative one – *Donkey for a Day*

Donkey For a Day is the title of an episode in an animated series based on the books of Alan Alexander Milne. Based on *New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, this episode describes the doings of Winnie-the-Pooh and his friends. In this particular episode, the main characters (Pooh Bear, Owl, Rabbit, Tigger and Piglet) try to cheer up their friend (Eeyore), who seems to be unusually sad and unhappy. The situation presented in the cartoon serves me as a metaphorical representation of informal counselling in friendly relationships, which can help portray this particular way of helping. The successive steps of organising assistance that I detect in it are presented in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Stages of organizing assistance based on *Donkey for a Day*

Source: own work.

The activities that I classify as the first stage of organising friendly assistance consist in attempting a diagnosis. The film begins with a scene in which Eeyore, sitting in the rain at the top of a high mountain, looks up into the sky. Observing this and having his notions about Eeyore's behaviour, one of his cartoon friends decides that he needs help. We hear the concerned friend say to himself *'Oh, poor Eeyore, just sitting there and staring'*. The observation inspires him to diagnose that Eeyore is unhappy and needs cheering up.

The second stage of organising assistance begins when the remaining friends are invited to join in. Their reaction is very enthusiastic. A suggestion to organise a *Donkey's Day* is swiftly taken up. On the day, namely, the friends will take turns trying to cheer him up. Each of them has their own way of doing so. They even start competing over who has the better idea. In Rabbit's opinion, *'Only gardening can bring happiness and joy'*. Owl is of another opinion, *'Flying! Only that can make one happy!'*. It is clear at this early stage that assistance will be offered to Eeyore in quite peculiar circumstances.

In the third stage of assistance, the *Donkey Day* is carried out. Paradoxically, it becomes a day of upsetting Eeyore. Each of the cartoon friends has their own vision of how to lift his spirits. Unfortunately, this vision is quite different from what would in fact make Eeyore cheerful. Pooh Bear decides to feed his friend some honey. Over protests and clear objections, Pooh Bear stubbornly carries out his plan, interpreting Eeyore's displeasure in his own way; *'I already see that you are happy!'*, or *'True happiness comes with seconds'*. Further cheering-up actions are performed in a similar manner. Owl tries to teach Eeyore to fly, ignoring his terrified expression. Rabbit harnesses him in a collar with a joyous shout of *'Only hard, useful work can make you happy'*. Eeyore is also forced to jump on springs in accordance with the philosophy that *'Jumping brings joy!'*. After a whole day of 'cheering up', Eeyore seems to be even more unhappy than before. He gives vent to his frustrations, saying to himself *'This must be Eeyore's unhappy day! What other torments await me today?'*.

Among the friends is one who has no idea of how to cheer Eeyore up. It is due to his lack of ideas that the adventure ends successfully, and the friends are able to come to terms with what Eeyore was really experiencing. The lack of an idea becomes a sort of stimulus to conversation. Eeyore hears the motivation inspiring *Donkey Day*, and his friend finds out why Eeyore took a seat on the mount. The explanation is completely different from the diagnosis proffered during the first stage of the enterprise. Eeyore summarises his friends' efforts thus: *'I am grateful to you all, although I nearly perished. I am not sitting here because I am sad, but because I am happy'*. The moment in which the entire situation is clarified crowns the fourth stage of assistance.

The narrative can help envisage informal counselling in friendly relationships. Although the entire adventure ends well, the very process of organising help for a friend demonstrates how not to help with 'good advice'. Analysing this situation, it is easy to point out several errors committed unconsciously by the friends of

the eponymous character. The first of them is the poor diagnosis offered. The help was based on misguided assumptions of what was happening with a friend. The analysis of the situation was stereotyped and grounded in biased suppositions. The friend gave others the impression of an unhappy person, but in fact, no such thing occurred. The fact that no conversation took place also makes one wary; none of the individuals involved bothered to ask what kind of help was necessary, or if any help at all was desired. The problem was thus misidentified, and the help organised turned out to be a needless offering. What is more – the friends appropriated the right to interfere in the world of another person without asking for his opinion. They were not authorised to make such an intrusion, but in spite of that, they stubbornly constructed an entire support strategy for their friend. It could seem that the friends offering assistance were motivated in this situation by the 'rescuer fantasy'. This syndrome consists in feeling a strong need to re-organise the lives of people who ask for help and lead them to a happy end, which has been defined by the counselling person (Kennedy, Charles 2004, p. 42). Often, however, the 'rescuer fantasy' comes up in situations in which nobody has asked for help, yet a misguided conviction of its necessity appears (such as in the example discussed above).

The adequacy of the manner in which the friends decided to offer assistance is also doubtful. Beginning from the diagnosis through to the specific ideas for solving the problem, the entire process placed the counsellor, and not the person being assisted, at the centre of events. The individual offering aid was the main actor. One could also get the paradoxical impression that this person was also the one accepting the help being offered. Such people are referred to as *do-gooders*. In the opinion of E. Kennedy and S.C. Charles (2004, p. 41), 'do-gooders are people who, in doing things for others, are in fact satisfying their own needs'. As a result, the 'good' becomes a mere side effect of the actual interest. The situation under analysis is an excellent example of the above. Each of the friends offered a kind of help that could be addressed to themselves. The person getting happy in this arrangement was not the one helped, but the one helping.

Kennedy and Charles ask the right questions. Indeed, they ask about the subject of counselling; *'Who needs assistance in this situation – the one doing the helping, or the one being helped?'*, as well as about its object *'What do we give others when we decide for them what they should or shouldn't do?'*. They also ask questions about the results of counselling *'How much good is ultimately achieved?'* (Kennedy, Charles 2004, p. 42). These are exceptionally important questions. They delineate a new area in which people helping others move about, especially in respect of the non-professional and friendly help I am interested in.

In the cartoon, the situation under analysis ultimately ended well. The matter was cleared up, and the friends gained an understanding of each other's motives. In life, however, this is not always the case. Here I will refer to the second narrative, which can help depict non-professional, friendly counselling, and ultimately demonstrate 'violent counselling'.

Narrative two – virtual conversations

The second situation took place on an Internet discussion forum frequented by young mothers. The starting point for the counselling episode was a forum user's marital problem. After a longer than usual absence from the forum, the woman wrote the following:

> *1. Forgive me, I didn't even feel like writing. I had an awful Christmas... My husband left me alone for the whole holiday with my daughter (on her first Christmas!...) to go drinking! I've already given up... There's nothing even to write. It is really so hard for me that sometimes I want to do something stupid. Only my child gives me a reason to keep going. Talking to my husband is like talking to a wall, in one ear and out the other. Sorry that I am letting all this out here, but I don't even have anyone to talk with about it.*[2]

This post evoked the natural tendency to offer support to the virtual friend. Users left comments on the situation, sharing their emotions and experiences. Analysing the comments, I observed that the majority of them fall into the category of what is pejoratively labelled as giving 'good pointers', and even giving precise, directive instructions. I have differentiated several different types of comments that dominated the course of the discussion. The utterances included:

- sympathising with the person experiencing the problem,
- value-judgements,
- coercive 'what-if',
- over-interpretation of the situation,
- coercion into suggested behaviours.

The comments that appeared most often betrayed a strong emotional and 'interactive' tension between the forum's users. Posts were laden with exclamation marks (often multiple ones), often written in capital letters (on forums this represents shouting). They clearly indicated what a problem it was for friends to maintain their emotional distance to the events described. This certainly resulted from their familiarity the woman going through difficulties. She had been a regular user of the forum for several months and was well liked there. Her problem proved so moving that it seemed to affect a larger number of people. Women on the forum who desired to help their friend followed their own intuition. Thus, the support often aimed to express a shared experience of the problem rather than an attempt at resolving it. Comments appeared expressing sympathy for the friend: *'Hugs from the bottom of my heart! I don't know what to say, so I won't say anything...'*. There

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[2] All comments come from a private internet forum, not open to the general public. I do not provide the name of the forum, as access to its contents requires an administrator's authorization. The comments located in this work retain their original writing style. They do not, however, enable the identification of the forum participants.

were also ones in which the women did not hide their outrage and openly expressed their shock: *'How could he do that to his daughter on her first Christmas? Drinking?! Words fail me! That he didn't feel the need to spend Christmas with his family!'*. Some women restrained themselves to single statements: '*What he did is terrible!!!*'.

These comments inspire reflection on the relationship between two different forms of support and understanding – empathy and sympathy. Carl Rogers regards empathy – alongside congruence and acceptance – as one of three important characteristics of a proper therapeutic relationship and actually considers it a precondition of such relationships. In popular understanding, empathy is often defined as the capacity for joint feeling. This is, however, an oversimplification. In the therapeutic and counselling contexts, empathy is defined as the 'capacity to understand what another person feels without necessarily experiencing the very same emotions' (Kennedy, Charles 2004, p. 19). Thus, supporting a person in suffering does not demand that the counsellor share in the suffering. Empathy protects counsellors' from entering into the trajectory of suffering experienced by the counselees. The empathetic 'in-between' relationship is possible if a counsellor understands the difficulties a client is facing, and not if s/he makes them common. Sympathy is a different case. It means 'feeling together' with another person (Kennedy, Charles 2004, p. 20). This type of support entails experiencing everything that the person living through the problem does. This is precisely the kind of situation observable on the Internet forum. The women's comments were not expressive of empathetic understanding, but rather exemplified a relationship of sympathy between virtual friends. Undoubtedly, in non-professional counselling, friendly sympathy with the person experiencing difficulties is entirely natural. At the same time, this very way of being can thwart the constructive support of another person. Kennedy and Charles contend that sympathy impoverishes and distracts the advisor by leaving him/her open to the storms and currents of emotions that come about in such cases (Kennedy, Charles 2004, p. 20). Shifting from empathy to sympathy could have had its consequences for the further course of the conversation.

Another type of comment that recurred in the virtual conversation was the rather frequent over-interpretation. The women tended to take mental shortcuts and, based on a few facts, offered a complete diagnosis of the situation, e.g., *'Clearly he doesn't care about his daughter, or about you'*. I call such comments 'over-interpretation' because they were insufficiently grounded and went beyond the facts at hand. Often they were also negative predictions about the future, such as *'What he did was awful, and I suppose it won't get any better!'*. Often considered a constructive method of dialogic counselling, interpretation is a process of clarifying events for the person experiencing problems in a way that they can be seen in a new light (Brammer 1984, p. 130). In contrast, over-interpretation is associated with a certain type of coercion and biased thinking. In the analysed situation, such over-interpretation probably did not contribute to a positive resolution of the problem.

Apart from over-interpreting the virtual friend's utterances and the situation she presented, the forum users also tended to over-interpret her expectations of support. The women felt obliged to sketch out a definite plan of action for their friend. Meticulously designed plans for stages of coping with the situation appeared on the forum:

- *'If talking doesn't help, there's no other way out – an ultimatum! Tell him: sober up and go to AA or say goodbye. Give him 24h to make up his mind. If he doesn't get sober and go to AA, pack your things, rent an apartment and live alone, far away from his alcoholism'.*

In this case, the online friends demonstrated an extreme form of directivity. The comments were akin to very precise instructions. What is more, these instructions did not take into account the needs of the person in difficulty. Her readiness, opinion, or consent to such actions were of little importance. At the same time, comments automatically appeared urging the woman to apply a given solution. Just a short time after presenting her problem on the forum, the woman could read the following words:

- '*You should throw the guy out of the house. I know it's tough for you and you don't want to live, but you've got to chuck him out! Trust me...*'
- '*Don't waste your time, don't waste your lives... walk away!!! DON'T LIVE ON DELUSIONS!!!*'
- '*You've got to take drastic steps!*'

The women often abundantly used such diction, without concern that their wording sounded actually like direct orders commanding the person experiencing the problem. All these coercive comments were saturated with the conviction that the person making them knows better, has experience, is competent, and is confident of her rightness (Wojtasik 1997, p. 170). At the same time, their imperative tone suggested that the woman could be viewed by her friends as rather unresourceful. According to John Holt (2009), a person who feels it is his life's mission to help others, if he fails to act with the greatest caution, will almost certainly define them as people who can't manage on their own. This was the case in the situation analysed here. Expressions such as 'you should, you have to' betray a certain lack of faith in the woman as an independently thinking person.

Another category among the posts I analyse includes coercive 'what-ifs'. This type of message consists in formulating a number of assumptions, none of which may prove true. While conversing with their friend, the women on the forum quite often resorted to the 'what if' strategy, e.g. *'If my husband started problem drinking, I'd leave him without a second thought'*. In the virtual conversations this conversation technique had a quite complex structure. Three types of pressure can be distinguished in the comments: 1) using a personal example, 2) adopting an imperative tone, 3) making a judgement on the person coping. Typically, the desire to help a
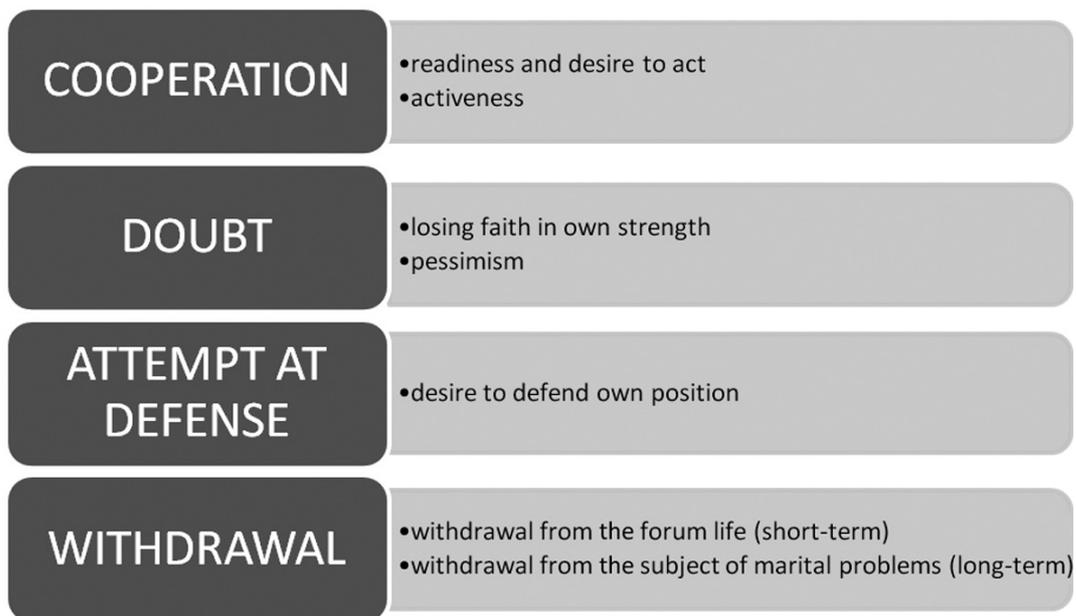
friend brought out the women's need to share their life's priorities and visions. Thus, in their utterances they used themselves as examples, forming a list of suppositions how they would each behave under similar circumstances. In doing so, they turned themselves into infallible experts, which was manifest also in the clearly consistent imperative tone they adopted. The woman going through problems continued to receive messages in which a certain type of directive was verbalised. It was articulated literally through words such as '*you must, you need to*' etc. The third component of the 'what if' comments was assessment of the person going through difficulties. Even though the judgement was expressed indirectly, it was easy to identify.

An example of a comment that contained all three of the pressure types was the following: '*If I were you, I would separate from him for a period of time, because you have to take responsibility for yourself and your child*'. First, the phrase '*If I were you*' implies its author's certainty of what her reactions and behaviour would be in an analogous situation. What is more, she also seems convinced of the rightness of the solution she proposes. Secondly, the clearly articulated 'you have to' excludes objection. It is not used to determine whether one agrees or dissents. It is intended to bring about a certain result; the task must simply be performed. In this situation, the woman clearly heard what she had to do in order to solve her problem in the proper way. Thirdly, a judgement of the coping person's behaviour is hardly veiled in the comment. The sentence '*You have to take responsibility for yourself and your child*' suggests that such responsibility had not previously been borne. The person going through the problem seems irresponsible, careless or negligent.

This third element frequently was dominant in the posts. Whole passages appeared which abounded in latent judgements of the person coping. In the sentence '*Remember, keep some respect for yourself in this whole thing*', the author clearly suggests that the person in difficulty has no self-esteem and feels rather poorly about herself. She thinks badly of herself, considers herself worse – in a word, she does not respect herself. In another statement, '*No man is worth bearing such humiliation*', the woman can learn that her situation is a reason for shame and affects her sense of dignity. In each of the many other such comments, the so-called 'values counselling' is palpably felt. This phrase was coined by J. Kargul, who stated that '*the advice seeker may suddenly realise not only that his/her problem can hardly be solved, but also that his/her entire model of life is completely different*' (Kargul 2004, p. 51). This situation is bound to evoke great frustration and disorientation. These feelings could also be observed in the woman.

With the conversation strategies (sympathising, over-interpretation, coercion, 'what-if', judgement) identified, attention must be paid to the reaction of the individual involved. Thus, my analysis proceeds to the consequences of proffering friendly, non-professional, virtual support. Below I present the woman's successive reactions:

Figure 3. The woman's reactions to the support offered

COOPERATION	•readiness and desire to act •activeness
DOUBT	•losing faith in own strength •pessimism
ATTEMPT AT DEFENSE	•desire to defend own position
WITHDRAWAL	•withdrawal from the forum life (short-term) •withdrawal from the subject of marital problems (long-term)

Source: own work.

Initially the woman assumed a cooperative attitude. She responded to comments and presented further details of the situation. She described the first years of married life, her husband's problems with alcohol and betrayal. She showed interest in what her Internet friends had to say. At that stage, the conversation was conducted 'online', i.e. the women were sitting at their computers and commenting in real time on their friends' particular utterances. Consequently, comments appeared very quickly and regularly.

However, as the volume and intensity of various forum users' posts grew, the author changed the tenor of her statements. Her comments began to sound increasingly pessimistic. As her friends' opinions were expressed forcefully and in imperative tones, the woman's answers appeared more subdued and doubtful. Comments appeared in which the woman criticised herself:

◆ '*A normal woman would know what to do, but I'm not normal and I don't know why I keep this louse around (…) And I keep giving him second chances*'.

The friends' statements clearly made her aware of her own powerlessness and helplessness. It was clear that the author did not applaud her behaviour; she began to doubt in her own strength, and to speak ill of herself. Clearly, the manner of conducting the conversation played a significant role.

At the next stage, the person being helped attempted to defend herself. The comments written with such involvement and depth of feeling by other forum participants must have felt coercive. Consequently, the entire support process bordered

on the violent. The posts from Internet friends could appear as a very unpleasant 'massed advice attack' on their addressee. Her irritation was palpable. At one time, she even undertook to defend herself. It lasted rather briefly; in fact, it was a one-off attempt. The woman made reference to the feelings that bound her with her husband. In doing so, she tried to portray her behaviour in a different light: *'It's easy to say that I should give him a swift boot in the a..! But you know you love someone so much that you don't believe he could do something like that to you'*. This remark went largely unnoticed on the forum. The flow of advice and direct instructions continued unabated.

Ultimately, the consequence of this was the main actor's withdrawal from the forum. First, the woman left for a few days, then came back, yet did not enter into dialogue concerning her marital problems. Despite questions posed by other participants, she no longer took up the subject of her relations with her husband. Most likely she neither used any of the advice offered, nor left her husband. Since this counselling 'session', her conversations with friends from the forum have concerned only 'safe' subjects related to motherhood.

'Violent' counselling (?)

The two narratives – *Donkey for a Day* and the virtual conversations – have triggered my reflection on counselling that, paradoxically, fails to help and can do damage. Kennedy and Charles argue that we can give others our time, understanding, sincerity, but if we attempt to do more, it can prove rather harmful, especially when it comes from our own need to do good (Kennedy, Charles 2004). Thus, there are situations in which good intentions can generate completely contrary effects. The ways of verbalising ideas and the influence individuals exerted on one another in the analysed situations exemplify 'violent' counselling. The title of this paper – from helping to hurting – suggests that the line between these two acts is rather fluid and sometimes completely obliterated. Definitionally, however, this border is very clear and firm.

Help is understood as supporting someone physically or morally; as activities, actions or behaviours distinguished by the helper's altruistic goal (Kargulowa 2004, p. 206). In the popular discourse, help means actions undertaken for the good of another person; activities that make a difficult situation less burdensome. Counselling is a particular type of help. It is defined as helping individuals to overcome the difficulties that hinder their personal development and to enhance their resources for development (Murgatroyd 2000, p. 16). Thus, the aim of counselling is to foster people's growth and development as well as to improve and optimise their situation in life.

Violence, however, is an entirely different act. It differs from help primarily in its goal, as well as in the values that underlie it. Usually violence is understood as

an advantage used in imposing one's will upon another or forcing someone into something. It is also identified with power illegitimately asserted over another.[3] In popular understanding, violence is associated with causing harm to another person and/or his/her interests.

The narratives analysed here combine both forms of activity. Both cheering Eeyore up and advising the friend contained elements of help and of violence. I think, however, that neither of the cases involved the advisors' malice or of ill will. Both the friends of Eeyore and of the woman had good intentions. Yet this does not make the support offered by them any less violent. Hence the idea to include both forms of activity in one term – 'violent' counselling (though similar coinages – as mentioned above – have already been used in counsellogy). The points below concisely express what 'violent' counselling is. And thus 'violent' counselling:

- is a type of counselling that pays no heed to the needs of the other person,
- puts the person assisting at the centre of the counselling situation and meets that person's needs,
- applies directive techniques (over-interpretation, coercion to react, coercive "what-if", value-judgements, etc.),
- often takes the form of non-professional assistance (e.g. it takes place among emotionally bound people, involves excessive engagement or sympathy with the person coping, etc.),
- has a coercive, even forceful nature (the person coping is forced to behave according to the assisting person's instructions),
- has an imperative character (it is emotionally charged and directly performed; in the virtual medium it uses capitalisation, which stands for 'shouting').

Małgorzata Jacyno (2007) observes that one of the main tendencies of contemporary culture is the so-called therapeutic discourse, which seems to have become ubiquitous and even dominant recently.[4] The examples analysed above can expose and warn against abuses in counselling, treated by many researchers as a mild form of psychotherapy.

<div style="text-align: right">Translated from Polish by Matthew La Fontaine</div>

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[3] http://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/przemoc.

[4] The first writings concerning the influence of the therapeutic ethos on society appeared in the West as early as the 1960s. The creator of the therapeutic culture is, by common consensus, Philip Rieff, who, in his book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* examines changes that Western societies have undergone. Rieff reconstructs the manner in which therapy, aiming not at the 'good life' but at the 'better life', has become the dominant mode of life in Western culture.

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