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THEORY AS ENGAGEMENT



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### **When words are not enough: Importance of “behind” the language use when studying conflicts in close relationships**

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Resolving conflicts in close relationships is challenging, especially when emotional injury is involved, because this entails balancing partially conflicting stakes: maintaining the relationship while preserving a favorable self- and other-view. Language-focused approaches highlight important aspects of this process. Discursive psychology reveals how actors utilize rhetorical devices to impose their own version and co-construct interactional identities. Narrative psychology focuses on the personal story stabilized through multiple retellings and permanent self- and other-constructions. However, our study of conflict negotiation and identity co-construction in adolescence highlights that, in addition to the analysis of discursive aspects, it is relevant to conceptualize and analyse phenomenological and affective processes that strikingly shape the participants' language use and story creation. These include authentic emotions (e.g. feeling hurt) and disclosing one's own vulnerability (e.g. insecurities, partial responsibility for relationship disturbance). The relevance of phenomenological processes is particularly evident when participants use less constructive strategies for friendship rupture repair, which entail verbal masking of unresolved tension by minimizing negative feelings, declaring that the problem has “magically” disappeared and insisting on an unchanged level of closeness. The unresolved conflict is linguistically, paralinguistically and performatively marked by: (a) the internal contradictions in the personal story, (b) salient disjunctions of the versions offered by different actors, (c) pronounced differences between the private and the shared narrative, preventing the other from understanding one's authentic experiences, and (d) perpetuated regressions to the core plot, i.e. issue that caused the conflict. These contradictions, omissions and repetitions convincingly (though indirectly) point to the affective processes that are either reflexively or pre-reflexively present in both individual stories and close personal interactions, thus emphasizing the importance of theoretical integration of phenomenological and discursive processes when studying conflict negotiation in close relationships.

Keywords: *discursive psychology, narrative psychology, friendship in adolescence, conflict negotiation, integration of experiential and discursive processes*