



EXAMPLE OF ABUSIVE PARTNERSHIP (MONO-DIRECTIONAL)

Margarethe and Susanne from Margarethe's Perspective

The interview with Margarethe took place in November 2002. Margarethe and Susanne had a partnership of almost ten years in which Susanne was repeatedly mistreated. The primarily physical attacks began approximately six months after the beginning of the partnership and in the beginning, occurred every second or third weekend. The women have a son who was around five years old at the time of the interviews. According to Margarethe, her attacks became less frequent following the birth of the child. At around the same time as the birth, she began a second relationship, which she described as an "affair" and which kept her concealed from her partner. At the time of the interview, the partnership was in a separation phase; she therefore ended the "affair" because she believed doing so would enable her to hold her partner.

At the outset, Margarethe referred to herself as a perpetrator. The interview was characterised by her efforts to explain her violent behaviour to herself and others. In doing so, she mainly sought the reason for her use of violence in her partner's behaviour. She attributed it to Susanne's jealousy and the lack of esteem that she felt Susanne had for her. She also perceived her partner as egoistic, disrespectful and inconsiderate. In addition, she wished for more affection from Susanne in the form of more all-embracing motherly care and security, which she perceived as lacking.

During the course of the interview it became clear that Margarethe was violent from the beginning of her first partnership. However, here she attributes the grounds to her own jealousy, which was an expression of her fear of losing her partner. Margarethe's history discloses various aspects that may have promoted her violent behaviour: Her parents died very early, her father died when she was nine years old, her mother when she was 13. Margarethe permits no anger towards her parents for leaving her alone so early, but rather idealises her childhood. According to her description, she more or less had to rely on herself from her 13th year onwards. Later, she was set no limits, either by her partners or by the doctors who provided medical care for at least one of her partners in hospital. Her circle of friends also shows understanding for her violent behaviour. Margarethe is indignant about this, which can be seen as an expression of her desire that they assume a parental role and set limits for her.

Through the early death of her parents, Margarethe missed out on any form of motherly care which she now hopes to find in her relationships. She wants to be loved unconditionally – even her violent side. At the same time, she is ashamed of her violence and has feelings of guilt. The interview was correspondingly ambivalent: Margarethe sees the grounds for her violence in Susanne but is also ashamed of her actions.

In addition to the emotional neglect resulting from the early death of her parents, her later life experience is characterised by aspects that could throw light on her violent behaviour: In the conflict between her homosexual brother and her parents, Margarethe experienced their massive rejection of homosexuality. The conflict ended in her brother being thrown out of the family home. She explains that she initially kept her lesbian relationships a secret and that one of her partners also hid her same-sex partnership, which increased her fear of losing her partner. It suggests that she may have internalised her parent's rejection and have become ashamed of her way of life. Margarethe attempts to counter her shame by having a relationship that is as “normal” as possible, whereby her vision of normality is strongly oriented to heterosexual relationship models. Since she sees her role in the relationship model in the assumption of the particularly “male/fatherly” tasks, she cannot adequately realise her need for care and security, which leads to disappointment. Margarethe ultimately attempts to assert her idealised perception of family and the associated expectations she has of her partner through violence. It is also this idealisation that keeps her in the relationship and prevents her from perceiving her partnership with Susanne as failed. She is not actually holding on to the relationship but to her ideal image.

Her perception of the violent episodes shows that the acts emerge from the feeling of weakness, powerlessness, and exasperation. During the act, Margarethe feels powerful and has the feeling of gaining power over events and her partner. She says that with the help of violence she brings her partner to do what is expected of her, i.e. her partner becomes compliant. After the act, she feels “bad” and demonstrates feelings of guilt and shame, whereby she perceives that both parties have been hurt. This description leads one to assume that she experiences the violence not only as destructive but also as self-destructive. The impersonal description of the violence on the other hand suggests that she does not perceive her violent behaviour as part of herself and feels helpless in relation to it. Since Margarethe believes that her partner evokes the violence through her behaviour, she is of the opinion that there would be no further attacks if her partner altered her behaviour. Margarethe's description of violent situations in which both women hit each other, leads to the assumption that she considers her partner to be equally responsible. She perceives herself not

only as an offender, but also as a victim and correspondingly, she sees Susanne not only as a victim but also as a perpetrator. Her negative description of Susanne clearly reflects this perception of her and at the same time allows her to place her own behaviour in a milder light.

However Margarethe is also conscious that her partner is afraid of her in that she didn't defend herself at all in the beginning, and that it was only later that she increasingly defended herself. In contrast, she has no fear of her partner at all. The disparate experience of fear by the two women indicates, contrary to Margarethe's perspective, a dynamic of violence with a perpetrator-victim structure in which Margarethe can be assigned above all the role of perpetrator and Susanne that of victim. Susanne' initial lack of defence also suggests that this enabled the violent relationship structure to first develop and consolidate.

The presence of a child is a special aspect of the relationship between Margarethe and Susanne. The son did not come from a former partnership, but was rather an ongoing "project" that the two women shared; he symbolises unity with the partner. Nevertheless, until his birth, Margarethe was the sole recipient of Susanne' motherly care. Margarethe describes her care for the son as relatively reserved: She describes her relationship to him as being caring but not "overly motherly". In contrast, Margarethe stresses the motherly characteristics of her partner whereby she is assigned the position of "mother". However, she views her partner's motherliness critically because this is not reserved only for her and the son, but also for example for the child from her former partnership. Margarethe refers to this child as the "ex-daughter" as Susanne is not the natural mother and, according to Margarethe, should therefore only bear limited responsibility. Because Margarethe also longs for Susanne' motherly care, she sees herself in a position of rivalry with the son. This can be interpreted as an expression of the underlying mother-child basis of the relationship. The desexualisation of the partnership can be cited as a further indicator here. Because Susanne does not adequately satisfy Margarethe's need for motherly care, Margarethe compensates for her neediness with an "affair", which she describes as a place where she too had the chance to "let go".

Finally the couple began psychotherapy in an attempt to solve the problems they were experiencing. The therapist ended the partner therapy after two years, after which she continued individual therapy with Susanne. Margarethe described the grounds for terminating the partner therapy as financial. However, it cannot be ruled out that the therapist considered ongoing partner therapy inappropriate and wished to continue working with Susanne alone. Margarethe sought a new therapist and had worked with her for two years at the time of the interview. It is evident that she was also violent during this time, which suggests that she lacks effective strategies for de-

escalation. At the same time, she can be described as “psychologically versed” and due to her psychological knowledge recognises the mechanism of partner’s fear of loss; but also uses this knowledge to threaten her partner with leaving her, i.e. to put pressure on her. Her description of herself as perpetrator allows the assumption that during therapy she has identified herself as a person who exercises violence. However at the time of the interview, she was unable to assume the associated responsibility for her acts but rather sought the reasons for her use of violence in her partner’s behaviour. In describing her attacks, Margarethe also used language that played down their seriousness, making their effect appear harmless and relativising the partner’s experience of being a victim.

The violent dynamic can be summarised as follows: The physical attacks were repeated regularly, whereby from Margarethe’s perspective they became less frequent after the birth of the child. At the same time, in her new partner from the “affair” she found someone who compensated for the broad “motherly” care that she missed in her partner. The violent dynamic is also cyclic, i.e. an attack is followed by a reconciliation phase follows in which Margarethe attempts to convey to her partner that she need only alter her behaviour and then there would be no further violence.

Ultimately the situation escalates once again resulting in another attack. Margarethe also describes a deterioration of the limits of the violence, i.e. it became more severe during the course of the relationship. Finally, she was afraid that she would seriously injure herself or her partner and decided to do something. This allows the assumption that psychological pressure must first be present before action is taken against violent behaviour; this results above all from the self destructive instances of violence. Susanne, on the other hand, is afraid of Margarethe, and this also influences her behaviour towards her. Susanne leaves the relationship first when she has found a new partner. Prior to this, she maintained the partnership, though Margarethe suspects that this was due to fear of loss. Because Susanne always forgave her, Margarethe did not have to fear that she would be left. She therefore experienced no negative consequences from her violent behaviour, which reinforced her impression that this was successful, at least in the short term.