

**TYPES OF COHESION, LEVELS OF CONFLICT AND COPING IN CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES:
AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH**

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**To Ulla Bjornberg, whose researches on equity
and power in conjugal relations greatly
enrich our knowledge on family dynamics.
With affection.**

INTRODUCTION

Despite the great demographic changes of the sixties, the crucial importance of conjugal and familial bond in the building of contemporary social identities remains strong and gets even stronger. However, this does not prevent identity construction to be achieved through many different ways, as well as the search for identity referentials by family to face painful failures. These two facts open the path to four interconnected issues in family research:

- 1) What are the main types of conjugal interactions characterizing contemporary families?
- 2) Are those types marked by different kinds and levels of problems or conflicts?
- 3) Does the way in which couples cope with their problems provide an explanation for the level of conflicts and the conjugal satisfaction found in the various types of interactions?
- 3) Finally and consequently, does the subjective assessment of the conjugal quality vary according to these types of interactions, the problems the couples face, and the way of coping they build?

We would like to examine briefly these questions on the basis of the literature and of a large empirical survey recently (1998- 1999) led with 1500 couples - where both she and he were interviewed - in a highly post-modern context, Switzerland.

TYPES OF INTERACTIONS

Since the 60s, the search for the definition of THE modern family as a homogeneous entity has largely given way to various analyses centered on the diversity of contemporary family interactions, and their classification in several ideal-types (Farber 1962, Kantor and Lehr 1975, Roussel 1985, Donati 1985). The definition of those types of conjugal interactions were meant to show that post-modernity is characterized by a variety of conjugal "logics" rather than by a convergence towards a single model, those alternatives depending to a large extent on economic, social and cultural resources available to

the couples. Research on those interactions types has progressively underlined the importance of five dimensions:

- 1) The degree of fusion - which designates the extent to which individual resources (such as time, activities, money, ideas, feelings) are put in common – opposes to the extremes couples and families basing their balance on similarity, resemblance and consensus to others basing it on research of authenticity and autonomy;
- 2) The degree of openness - which designates the intensity of the exchanges between the family group and its social environment – opposes to the extremes families who want to keep their cohesion through a homebird attitude to others who only conceive their cohesion through the processing of outside energies and information ;
- 3) The priority given to instrumental or expressive goals in the couple opposes to the extremes families who insist on social integration and economic success of the group to others who prefer relations based on tenderness, communication and psychological comfort
- 4) The degree of differentiation of roles – which designates the extent to which specific tasks are attributed differently to both genders – opposes an exchange based on pre-established codes to a negotiation based on cooperation;
- 5) The level of ritualisation - that is the extent to which the daily family life is ruled by precise and constraining norms – refers to the same analysis.

The first three variables refer to the dimension of cohesion, i.e., the way in which couples construct their we-ness in defining the inner and external boundaries of the group. The two last types are associated with regulation, i.e., the way actions are coordinated within the group.

On this basis, what kind of ideal types of family interactions can we distinguish ? In our recent research on 1500 couples, a cluster analysis based on 43 indicators pertaining to the five dimensions we just mentioned allowed us to define five – not only one - contrasted types of couples interactions (Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy, 2003, Table 3.29, p. 121):

Couples of type Bastion are characterized by a strong tendency to fusion, closure and gender differentiation. All individual resources are to be put in common, and the main value to be achieved is consensus and similarity. A good couple is the one where differences are minimal. Openness, or contacts with the external world are not valued much. Quite to the contrary some mistrust exists toward external actors, where intimacy is much valued. The family as a group comes first compared with individual interests or orientations. This rather close and warm world is sustained by a traditional division of labor between genders, in relations with rigid norms. This strong differentiation also strengthens goals priority, women being much more internally oriented in this type than men. Couples of type Association are on the opposite. Associative couples are open and autonomous at the same time. They also present a quite egalitarian power and role distribution, with no difference between spouses on instrumentality and expressiveness. Their openness is associated with high scores of social participation. The central values structuring this kind of functioning are at the same time the quest for

personal authenticity and the negotiation of individual rights. This gives a strategic importance to communication. Couples of type Companionship are characterized by a strong tendency toward fusion. At the same time, they show a very strong tendency to openness. The level of sexual differentiation is close to the average. The companionship couples make a very frequent use of environmental resources in order to reinforce internal solidarity. The central value is community, seen as a common fate between couple and its belonging groups. Couples of the Cocoon type are characterized by high levels of fusion and closure. But they do not present a high-level gender division of domestic and relational roles. They mainly emphasize the internal goals of the union for both spouses. Their functioning is at the same time warm, closed, and relatively free of gender biases. The dominant value is comfort, both psychological and social. Couples of type Parallel are characterized by a strong differentiation of domestic and relational roles between spouses. They are strong on female expressiveness and on male instrumentality. Parallel couples have comparatively low scores of fusion and high scores of closure. Those are couples who feel threatened by the external world (to the family) without investing the internal relationships. The idea of separate worlds for spouses seems to be at the center of the functioning of those couples. Here, a good couple is characterized by order and regularity.

PROBLEMS AND CONFLICTS

So, this analysis convinces us that modernity is characterized by the coexistence of some contrasted types of family "projects" rather than by convergence towards only one pattern (cf. Roussel, 1985). But the question is then to know if these types have similar levels and types of conflicts, or host similar problems. The interest for the definition of various conjugal styles in post-modern societies is linked with the ambition of responding in an informed manner to authors predicting either the coming of a radical crisis of the family or the coming of a golden age of conjugal intimacy at last freed from traditional and institutional constraints. This intention inspired several typologies, notably those of Reiss and Olson (Olson and McCubbin, 1983, Reiss. 1981). Let's address this issue in referring here to the difficulties couples may encounter in achieving various basic tasks that every group has to complete, such as

- a) the definition of priority objectives of the group,
- b) the establishing of boundaries between the individuals, the group and the environment and
- c) the coordination of roles, models and disciplines.

From this point of view, one can hypothesize that conjugal conflict is associated with three major types of tensions, which characterize the conjugal project in the Western culture. The first tension opposes the frequent "fusional" ideals of conjugal happiness, in which "sharing" is considered as the key to happiness, to the rather individualistic ideas of the "self", in which clearly establishing personal rights and autonomy is considered as a sign of psychological maturity and an evidence of relational success. Creating and maintaining the 'good distance', an essential element to the cohesion of the group, is often seen in that case as fragile. One can likewise consider, together with Ashkam (1984),

that the concern for security and stability, as much in social life than in conjugal relationships, often conflicts with the aspiration to identity, perceived as the expression of some authenticity which valorizes innovation and change. The second tension is constituted by an obvious gap between, on one hand, the representations and ideals that insist on equality and the altruistic negotiation of power, and, on the other hand, the persistence of quite unegalitarian practices, be it in matters of domestic activities or socialization roles (cf. Björnberg's analysis of equity for these matters). And a great number of analysts link this apparent inertness of family behaviors with the persistence of economic disparities between men and women that affect the management of domestic power all the more so, since the latter has lost all legitimating discourse. Finally, the gap existing between the social representations of the family bond and the actual family experience in everyday life has often been brought to the fore. On one side, the privatization thesis states that the conjugal organization should mainly depend on individual needs and desires (institutions should serve individuals and not the other way round); in the same perspective, love should transcend all limits and disregard all opposing norms. The privatized and promethean imaginary is often constructed by the media. But on the other side, the strength and rigidity of the norms of various institutions (schools, health care, child care, professional, administrations, etc.) greatly constrains family realities, and the resources at the couple's disposal are often scarce. This leads Denzin (1987) to write that a large amount of mediatic messages present 'family myths' that, being very far from the intimates' concrete life, are both unable to constitute a guidance for daily activities, and nevertheless disqualify the everyday experience of family members. To summarize, functional problems that couples have may be associated with inequality of roles, with tensions between needs of fusion and needs of autonomy, and, finally, with the way in which families deal with their environment. Thus, we hypothesize that the nature of these problems, as well as their frequency, depend on the degree of fusion of resources, and the degree of rigidity of regulation.

These cultural tensions relating to autonomy, equality and privatization have of course their echo in the types of interaction of the couples and in the conflicts or problems they meet. Our study on 1500 couples with whom these themes were approached through some twenty indicators screened with a MCA leads to group these problems in three main categories :

a) problems of social deviance (violence, sexual roughness, addictive behavior, etc.)

b) problems related with coordination of activities and projects of the family members
and finally

c) relational or interactional problems (problems of communication, affective disillusion, important difficulties with the spouse's personality, etc.). A first striking result is the high frequency of problems and open conflicts in the observed sample. At the time of the interview, 23% of the couples meet three or more of the severe problems quoted above (38% two or more, 62% one or more). When considering past and present problems, 25 % of the couples have met five or more severe types of difficulties (61 % more than two). By category, we can observe that 29% of the couples have met more than two important relational problems in their life course; 29% have met more than two important coordination problems. Problems related with violence and drug abuse are much less

frequent but still more than one couple in four (27%) have met at least one such a problem in its life course. 30% of the couples experience serious or severe open fights, this proportion reaching 20 % for the open fights which are in the mean time serious and frequent. Apart of that, problems pertaining to the performance of parental roles reach 47 % of the interviewed parents.

The second striking fact is that the frequency of the three categories of problems shows a similar profile, depending on the types of interaction. From our results, it appears clearly (Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy, 2003, Table 4.12, p.160) that the companionship style of interactions is associated with a lower level of problems than any other interactional style (severe current problems presents in 12 % of the couples in the first case, as compared with 33% in Association or Parallel couples). When open conflicts occur, they are much less serious and reconciliation is much easier than for other couples. In contrast, Parallel and Associative couples score very high on almost all indicators of conflict. Both males and females of those couples acknowledge a higher level of tensions and more frequent open conflicts than the average. They show higher rates of problems of any kinds. Cocoon and Bastion couples, on the other hand, are rather close to companionship couples, with a slightly higher frequency of problems and open conflicts.

COPING

This correlation between the types of interactions and the level of problems couples encounter leads us to wonder whether certain types of interaction are by essence more conflictual (because they are opposed to some elementary instincts) or if it is rather due to the coping modes used for managing the problems which arise in the family. Indeed, various dimensions of coping emphasized by literature (cf. for instance Bouchard et al. 1997) - Agressiveness, Support and Avoidance as far as the relational aspects of coping are considered; Rationality, Communication, Emotional control and Activity as far as actional aspects of coping are taken into consideration - can very well depend on the degree of fusion, openness and differentiation characterizing conjugal interactions. Some types of interaction can then be characterized by a lack in coping, leaning in turn to a pile up of problems. This assumption could explain the fact that we meet a difference in quantity - rather than in quality - of problems between the various types of interaction considered hereafter. These assumptions seem to be in accordance with the results of our study. When we relate the dimensions of coping We have mentioned with the types of interactions, we can observe that, although companionship and cocoon couples show similarly low levels of conflicts and tensions, they have quite different ways of solving the problems they face. Companionship couples show high support and reject aggressiveness and avoidance, whereas cocoon couples are comparatively low on support and do not reject avoidance strategies. Quite differently, associative couples, who show frequent open conflicts, report high levels of aggressiveness and communication (for women) at the same time. Quite differently, parallel couples, which also have frequent disagreements and problems, are much less communicative and external. To summarize, identical levels of conflict do not trigger identical coping strategies. Conjugal interactional styles promote various modes of coping independently of their association with conjugal conflict (Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy, 2003, graph 5.5., p.221).

EVALUATION OF THE CONJUGAL QUALITY AND THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF COPING

Let's turn now on to our fourth question: is the amount of problems encountered by the couple associated with a darker subjective evaluation of the conjugal quality, and which is the mediating role of coping in this dynamic system? The literature envisages this evaluation of the conjugal quality from three very different points of view (cf. for instance Johnson et al. 1986) :

- a) the divorce proneness,
- b) the subjective rating of satisfaction with the main aspects of conjugal life and
- c) the degree of psychological well-being of the spouses as measured, for instance, by a scale of symptoms of depression.

Our results (Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy 2003, table 6.10, p.246) show that there is quite a strong correlation between types of conjugal interactions and

- a) divorce proneness;
 - b) conjugal satisfaction
- and
- c) depressive symptoms.

Parallel couples are associated with the highest conjugal dissatisfaction and the most frequent thoughts of separation for both males and females. Companionship couples have the lowest scores on both measures for both genders. Associative couples have a similar profile to parallel couples, although less extreme. Cocoon and bastion couples lay in between. Correlation between signs of depression and conjugal styles of interactions confirms those results. Again, parallel couples show the highest scores on the scale of depression, whereas companionship couples show the lowest scores, the other three types laying in between. Interestingly, scores of women are more sensitive to conjugal styles of functioning than scores of men.

But in order to test more completely our assumption on the mediator role of coping in the relation between types of interaction and level of conflict, it is useful to try a single multivariate analysis based on a structural model with latent variables, which specify which variable has an effect on which other variable. It happens clearly (Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy, 2003, Graph 6.1, p.250) that the mediating role of coping is confirmed by this structural model, as fusion, closure and differentiation of regulation mainly influence coping, which in turn has an impact on conjugal problems and conjugal quality. In consequence, this analysis confirms that the effect of the interactional structures is indirect, as it is mediated by coping quality. Only one direct path exists between level of closure and symptoms of depression of women. Let us underline that there is no direct relationship between types of conjugal interactions and conjugal quality.

CONCLUSION

Our results show that a strong emphasis on autonomy, a strong tendency toward closure of family

life and a rigidly gendered organization of conjugal roles are associated with increased conjugal problems and a deterioration of conjugal quality. In other words, privatisation, inequality and the individualism referred to above play a crucial role. When those three variables are considered jointly, they make a very significant difference as far as the various outcomes mentioned above are concerned. For instance, 41% of autonomous, closed and rigidly gendered couples had severe conjugal problems at the time of the interview. This proportion reaches only 8% in fusional, open and equal couples. 54% of the first category have thought to divorce, versus only 22 % of the second category. Marked depressive attitudes appear in 41 % of the women in the first category, versus 15 % in the second.

These results are congruent with Olson's and Reiss's analysis, which show that some porosity of family boundaries, some flexibility in rule making and a certain balance between autonomy and community are essential for an adequate functioning (Olson and McCubbin, 1988,1989, Reiss 1971). Our analysis precises the importance of the mode of coping. Active coping is associated with a Companionship mode of interactions, whereas more extreme couples (in the sense of Olson) are correlated with poorer types of coping. A strong emphasis on autonomy in conjugal relationships seems to make it extremely difficult for couples to deal adequately with problems. And this poor coping appears in return to stimulate the growth of unsolved and severe conflicts.

The question is then to know – and we would conclude by this – whether the types of interactions we have been observing exclusively depend on psychological factors or if it is the level of socio-economic resources of the couple that influences its type of interactions. Our results show that the poorer the social resources, the higher the frequency of Parallel, Bastion and Cocoon types of interactions. The richer these resources – notably those of the women – the more frequent the Association type. This correlation corresponds to two different kinds of difficulties of the couples at the bottom and the top of the social hierarchy. At the bottom, the lack of power and resources produces altogether a very strong investment in the couple and a kind of distrust towards environment which in turn often leads to dysfunctional behaviors, such as a high value put on rigid norms preventing a good adaptation to a changing context, or the pointing out a scapegoat which provides the couple a kind of identity or sense in an uncontrolled world, or even the locking away of the couple in an enmeshed relationship , which is a manner of eliminating the complexity of a world felt as dangerous and unmastered. At the top of the hierarchy, the importance of the resources at the partners disposal – which allow various kinds of alternatives to the present relation – coupled with gender inequalities may encourage a certain disengagement which prevents the search for coordinated and efficient modes of coping (cf. also our former results in Kellerhals et al. 1982, 1993). In conclusion, let's say that if it is true that couple and family life are of a central importance in the building of contemporary identities, it nevertheless often happens, in a constantly moving world with very complex opportunity structures, that the structure of social context interactions does not allow partners to conveniently solve problems they have to face. As a result, this relation - supposedly meant to build the identity of the partners - contributes in most cases to destroy it. A valuable way of reducing this risk could be found in strengthening the ability of the couple, and hence of the family, in the art of coping. This could be done in cooperation with professionals like family therapists and family counselors. Becoming more

conscious of the variety of family types of functioning in contemporary society, and define for these various forms specific ways in which the coping process could be improved would be a very useful stake.

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