

What pluralization of family relations? Conflicts, conjugal interaction styles, and social milieu

Éric WIDMER, Jean KELLERHALS, René LEVY

Abstract

In the 1970s and 1980s, a number of studies brought to light a variety of family interaction styles characteristic of contemporary societies. Which of them have lasted? How are they related to the social structure? What problems and conflicts are they likely to bring about? This article aims to answer those questions on the basis of a large representative sample indicating couples' social and generational characteristics. Five styles were empirically identified, associated with sharply varied frequency levels for problems and open conflict. Prevalent conjugal conflict coincides with a strong tendency for spouse or partner autonomy, sex-differentiated roles, and couple self-enclosure. These results are largely due to the differential effect of the conflict-management modes inherent in the various interaction styles, these in turn influenced by couples' social characteristics and position. No increasing standardization of conjugal interaction modes was observed; indeed, advanced modernity seems characterized instead by several fairly distinct models highly dependent on position in the social structure.

The problems or crises that today's couples encounter have in theory been a focus of much concern for researchers studying the family. Still, in Europe at least, there are no studies systematically relating these problems to the structure of conjugal relations. The way was opened by psychological or psychopathological approaches (Reiss 1971 and 1981; Kantor and Lehr 1975; Olson and McCubbin 1989), but research using these approaches most often proceeds by observing clinical populations, where the search for a solution to a crisis or malaise is of primary interest; this means the central questions of representativity of observations and how families' ways of functioning are related to the social structure become secondary. And these are important questions. In response to alarmist discourse on the decline or definitive weakening of the couple and family, announcing this development as a kind of correlative of advanced modernity, and enthusiastic accounts from other quarters of new types of conjugal relations, claimed to be more mobile, communicative, focused on self-realization and freed from nearly all institutional and social constraints, there is reason to look empirically into the state of real couples. In this respect, two questions today are particularly relevant.

The first has to do with whether conjugal interaction models or styles are becoming standardized across the social structure. Several recent works on the family and intimacy suggest that contemporary conjugal functioning follows a kind of all-encompassing logic and they cite approximately the same characteristics of the "modern" family as those identified by Burgess (1960) in his ideal-type "companionship" family: an affinity-based marriage or union whose central and perhaps only function is enriched personal development through internal, essentially contractual and egalitarian arrangements, free of external constraints (particularly kinship control).¹

¹A case in point is Anthony Giddens' *Modernity and self-identity* (1992) and *The transformation of intimacy: sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies* (1994). Giddens' concept of "pure relationship," which he claims is an archetype of "high modernity," directly or indirectly makes use of several dimensions in Burgess' companionship family (1960); focus of the relation on self-exploration, insistence on negotiation and symmetry in power relations, decidedly weaker external constraints on the relationship, etc.

In fact, the profound changes in family demography during the 1960s already seriously called into question the classical opposition between family as institution and family as companionship with which Burgess proposed to characterize the shift from traditional to modern conjugality. This opposition, and the evolutionist approach underlying it, yielded in large degree to various attempts to define conjugal interaction styles or types of functioning, based on four conceptual dimensions: spouses' degree of autonomy within the couple, couple's openness to its environment, instrumental versus expressive orientation of relationship, and weight given to negotiation in a couple's daily functioning (Kellerhals, Troutot, Lazega 1993). On this basis, various typologies were proposed that revealed the existence of a strong correlation between family functioning and social status, thereby calling into question the hypothesis of a general movement toward a single family model. This was the case for Switzerland, for example, (Kellerhals et al. 1982; Kellerhals, Coenen-Huther, Modak 1987; Kellerhals and Montandon 1991; Kellerhals, Troutot, Lazega 1993), where we observed that ample economic and cultural resources went together with spouses' emphasizing individual autonomy and couple openness, while a relatively low level of same resources was linked to statutory normativity, emphasis on group prerogatives over individual's, and family's feeling a certain degree of mistrust or wariness toward its environment. Are couples' present situations continuous with the results obtained twenty years ago or do they on the contrary corroborate the hypothesis of conjugal model standardization?

Properties of interaction styles

A major correlative question has to do with the consequences or "properties" of interaction styles. While research in the 1980s showed the foundation for various conjugal interaction styles to be structural differences, the functional consequences of these same styles are still largely unknown. This central dimension of sociological analysis must be established today with regard to contemporary couples, in response to antagonistic theses of the "decline" and "freeing up" of family relations. Have conjugal problems and conflicts been in large degree "privatized," depending now primarily on internal family dynamics rather than the contexts which those families are integrated into, or are they instead a matter of specific interaction styles, anchored in social structures? The question of interaction style properties can be handled either in purely quantitative terms—is a given interaction style more closely associated with all varieties of problems than another?—or through the hypothesis that each style presents a particular problem

profile: one style is more likely to give rise to communication problems, for example, whereas another raises decision-making problems. In this case, problems could be similar in intensity but vary by interaction style.

In any case, given that the stress laid on the notion's multidimensionality (Gelles 1995; Sussman, Steinmetz, Peterson 1999; Sussman and Steinmetz 1987), the answer to the second question requires specifying what the term "conjugal conflict" covers. The functional problems encountered by couples are often thought of as a highly significant indicator. Every couple has to accomplish a certain number of high-priority tasks (see for example McKenry and Price 1994; Gelles 1995; Sussman and Steinmetz 1987), such as defining family group's priority objectives and the dividing line between individuals and the group, creating proximity between spouses or partners in terms of feelings and sexuality, etc. These problems can give rise to open conflicts or not, since in some cases they remain latent, leading to disappointment and absenteeism rather than domestic quarrels. Emphasis on consensus and couple loyalty can in fact give rise to a refusal of open conflict even though there are major functional problems. Conversely, we can hypothesize that con-

jugal functioning centered on autonomy is more likely to legitimate open manifestations of disagreement.

Showing how dependent the frequency or type of problems arising in a couple is on couple's interaction style is only one step in this inquiry. Once particular problems have appeared they can be treated fairly effectively and even gradually be resolved, or they can go untreated and accumulate. A vicious circle can thus be created: ineffective conflict management increases dissatisfaction, which in turn favors the emergence of new problems, etc. The question is then whether the different identifiable interaction styles are characterized by unequally effective conflict-handling modes, and if this gives rise to diverse levels of satisfaction. Though that question is easy to formulate, it is hard to circumscribe empirically because there are so many criteria on which to base an evaluation of the quality of conjugal life: propensity to divorce (Hicks and Platt 1970), spouses' direct evaluations of personal conjugal satisfaction, degree of enriching psychological development.

We shall therefore treat the following questions. First, what interaction styles are encountered in contemporary couples? Have the structural differences that are the basis of these styles grown weaker in the last twenty to thirty years due to various standardization factors, factors that have as much to do with increasing media influence as with economic developments (Beck 1986)? Next, to what degree are interaction styles marked by social milieu? Are conjugal patterns relatively homogeneous in this respect as well, or are there major variations by where and where couples are located in the social structure? Lastly, are interaction styles characterized individually by specific problems and differing levels of conflict? Is couples' way of handling problems and conflict significantly associated with their interaction style? What repercussions do these problems and the way they are handled have on how positively partners evaluate their shared life? Each of these questions submits the hypothesis that conjugal relationships have become standardized to empirical verification, by looking at the structures of those relationships, their functional properties, or their anchoring in society.

The empirical study

Though the above questions, absolutely central to sociological research on the family, only make sense in relation to each other, they are seldom treated simultaneously on an empirical basis. Our study, "Stratification sociale, cohésion et conflits dans les familles contemporaines," a major standardized questionnaire survey conducted with married and unmarried couples with or without children residing in Switzerland using a random, non-proportional sampling from the country's three major linguistic regions (French, German, and Italian), allows for partially rectifying this bias. To be included in the sample, respondents had to be between twenty and seventy years old, have been living together for at least a year, and reside in Switzerland (they did not have to be of Swiss nationality). Data were collected between October 1998 and January 1999 by the MIS Trend polling institute. A stock of phone numbers was drawn at random from Swisscom's electronic directory *Terco*; 5652 households met the above criteria;² 1753 agreed to participate in the survey. We stopped interviewing shortly after reaching the 1500 couples initially planned. Both partners in each of the 1534 couples included in the survey (either married or cohabiting), were

²95% of Swiss households are telephone subscribers.

interviewed by telephone, giving a total of 3068 interviews. Responses were then weighted by population size of each of the linguistic regions.³

One of the major difficulties we encountered using this mass of synchronic empirical data was having to compare couples engaged in very different phases of family life, belonging to different cohorts, existing as couples for quite different lengths of time, and who present potential selection biases in that “fragile” couples de facto self-eliminated from the sample through separation and divorce. The aim of the study was not, however, to describe development of conjugal interaction structures over time, which would have required a longitudinal study with repeated interviews, but more simply to show the effect of couples’ social positioning (in terms of cultural and economic capital at their disposal) on interaction styles, statistically controlling for effects associated with position in life course; then to identify the properties of these interaction styles in terms of conflict, ways of handling problems, and evaluation of the quality of conjugal life, once again statistically controlling for effects associated with couple’s life course position. From these two perspectives, the data allow for getting beyond the limitations of previous surveys based on samples that were much more restricted in their coverage of life course and social structure.

To statistically control for life course effect, we constructed a synthetic variable indicating couple’s phase in family life. The variable takes into account whether a couple does or does not have children, whether children are living “at home” or not, their ages (see Mattesich and Hill 1987; Levy et al. 1997), and distinguishes six situations: 1) couples without children but young enough to have one,⁴ here called “pre-child couples”; 2) families with children of pre-school age⁵; 3) families with (compulsory) school-age children; 4) families with children of post-school age; 5) couples whose children no longer live with them; 6) couples without children who cannot be attributed a specific phase of the standard family life course. Table I presents various characteristics of these phases.

Table 1 *Characteristics of family life phases*

Average age of woman/Average age of man/Average longevity of couple/ % of married couples/
% of blended families/Average % of time woman works

Pre-child couples
Pre-school families
School-age families
Post-school families
Post-children families
Couples without children

The average ages characterizing each of the first five phases confirm that they are highly likely to occur in the order given. Couples in pre-child and pre-school phases have very similar age and

³Both the survey questionnaire and a detailed description of the sample drawing procedure can be downloaded at <http://www.unil.ch/pavie/recherches/documents/widmeretalrfs.pdf>.

⁴On the basis of population statistics, this limit was fixed at 36 for the woman.

⁵For couples with several children, we took into account the youngest child’s age.

couple longevity profiles, indicating that couple formation is likely to be followed quickly by the birth of a first child. The later phases are distinguished from each other both in terms of partners' average ages, couple's longevity, age and status of children (living at home or not, in school or finished schooling).

Though this variable cannot replace longitudinal analyses strictly speaking, it does allow for making "metastatic" comparisons; it captures effects at a given time associated with arrival of first child and effects of cohort and couple longevity, without distinguishing among them. Using it to systematically control for associations between, on the one hand, conjugal conflict and social anchoring, on the other, interaction styles, works to ensure the validity of results obtained across the life course. In this respect the present study offers a solid advantage over previous ones using data on only one or two family phases (e.g., Kellerhals et al. 1981; Kellerhals et al. 1987; Kellerhals and Montandon 1991).

Current dominant conjugal interaction styles

To empirically approach conjugal interaction styles, we selected seven dimensions that use the same analytic axes on which most psychosociological typologies of family functioning have been constructed (Kellerhals, Troutot, Lazega 1993): 1) degree of "fusion" between couple members, which designates partners' propensity to combine their respective resources and emphasize values of consensus and similarity (Roussel 1980; O'Neill and O'Neill 1972); 2) degree of couple openness, which designates the strength of informational and relational exchanges between couples and their proximate environment (Kantor and Lehr 1975; Reiss 1971); 3) degree of priority attributed by partners to the family (Parsons and Bales 1955; Donati 1985), the point here being to determine if internal, relational objectives such as support and affective security dominate or if, on the contrary, external, instrumental ones such as social integration and mobility do; 4) degree to which conjugal roles are sex-specific (Aldous 1977; Bott 1971), which designates extent of inequalitarian division of domestic work and occupational activities, as well as relational roles; 5) degree of differentiation with regard to decision-making power (Blood and Wolfe 1960), which concerns domination of specific decision-making areas by one or the other partner; 6) differential investment of the domestic sphere by men and women, measured by sacrifices each partner is willing to make with regard to that sphere (Krüger and Levy 2001); the hypothesis operative here is that of a "master status" in the sense of a sphere of primary investment specific to each sex, the family sphere for women and the occupational one for men, that subordinates the investments each can make in the other sphere of activity; under the regime of sex-specific master-statuses it is first and foremost the woman who makes the sacrifices required by family life; 7) degree of family life "routinization," which designates couple's propensity to follow a set of relatively fixed norms concerning hours and schedules and distribution of family territories, etc. (Gelles 1995; Olson and McCubbin 1989; Olson, Lavee and McCubbin 1988).

The first three dimensions refer to *couple cohesion*; that is, the way partners "invest" the couple, emphasizing either i) similarity of orientations and ideas, time spent together, and consensus, or ii) individual autonomy; whether they consider external interactions with other individuals or groups with a certain wariness or instead value external contacts because they perceive them as indispensable to the internal dynamic. The next four dimensions pertain to *regulation or coordination* mode between couple members, an axis on which we can readily establish an opposition

between i) strict, sex-specific role and discipline division and clearly established family rhythms and ii) communicative coordination based on defining situations together on a case by case basis and calling for negotiation-based behaviors (Kellerhals, Troutot, Lazega 1993; Widmer, Kellerhals, Levy 2003).

These dimensions were measured using a series of indicators (see Appendix for presentation),⁶ including six measures for women, four for men, and one mixed, with one partner chosen at random in each couple. The measures were introduced into an ascending hierarchical classification analysis using Ward's clustering method and squared Euclidean distances (under SPSS) (Aldenderfer and Blashfield 1984; Lebart, Morineau, Piron 1997). A series of solutions was examined, and the final choice made on the basis of empirical criteria; the five-category solution was chosen for purposes of clarity, parsimony, and homogeneity. The results are presented in Table II. It should be pointed out that this is one of the first inductive approaches to conjugal interaction styles. Most existing typologies can be described as "analytic" because constructed deductively by crossing two and in some instances three pre-defined scales (Kellerhals, Troutot, Lazega 1993).

Parallel-style couples are characterized by strongly sex-typed domestic and relational roles, strong fusion and marked self-enclosure. They feel threatened by their environment while not investing in internal relations, and they distribute functional and relational roles in a rigid differentiated fashion. The values that organize action are order, differentiation of activity spheres and withdrawal into the self. This interaction style accounts for 17% of couples sampled.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are *Companionship*-style couples, with high fusion and openness scores and a comparatively low degree of role and power differentiation. These couples use environmental resources to strengthen internal solidarity and communication. The values guiding behavior are external integration and community. Companionship couples account for 24% of the sample.

Bastion-style couples are founded on couple self-enclosure, fusion, and sex differentiation. There is no turning to the world outside the couple; on the contrary, these couples view external actors with a certain wariness while strongly valuing internal relations. Family as a group takes precedence over individual interests and orientations. This warm, closed world is supported by sharply sex-specific roles and relatively rigid arrangements expressed also in couples' orientation—women favor aims internal to family life, while men strongly favor external ones. Conjugal life is organized by consensus and tradition. The Bastion style accounts for 16% of couples.

Table II *Conjugal interaction style characteristics (%); results of ascending hierarchical classification analysis (Ward's method)*

Respondent/Parallel/Companionship/Bastion/Cocoon/Association/Average/Cramer's V

Size of the category (% of total)

⁶Indicators refer to Questions 6-14, 16, 18, and 66 of the survey questionnaire, available on the net (see note 3).

Cohesion

Fusion	W
Fusion	M
Self-enclosure	W
Self-enclosure	M
Inward orientation	W
Inward orientation	M

Regulation

Differentiated functional roles	W
Differentiated relational roles	W
Differentiated decision-making power	W
Strong normative master-status	M
Strong routinization	M/W

Reading: W: woman's response; M: man's response. ** = significant at $p < .01$.

High levels of both fusion and couple self-enclosure define *Cocoon*-style couples. Contrary to *Bastion*-style couples, however, distribution of domestic tasks and relational roles is neither sex-typed or inequalitarian. Whereas in *Bastion* couples, only women favor internal objectives, in a *Cocoon* couple both partners say they have such objectives. This interaction style is at once warm, closed and relatively free of gender inequalities compared to *Bastion*-style. Behavior-organizing values are comfort and intimacy. These couples account for 15% of the sample.

Lastly, *Association*-style couples are radically opposed to *Bastion*-style couples: low degree of both fusion and couple self-enclosure, egalitarian division of power, roles relatively undifferentiated by sex. The main values that structure this interaction style are quest for personal authenticity and negotiation of individual rights. *Association* couples make up 29% of the sample.

It may therefore be affirmed that several styles of conjugal interaction co-exist at this time, continuous in relation to a number of 1970s and 1980s studies (see Kellerhals et al. 1982; Kellerhals and Montandon 1991). This represents the first inductive confirmation, reached through empirical construction of the "analytic" typologies constructed deductively in the earlier surveys. Taking into account both partners' responses also allows for further confirming the results of those studies, which were based on interviews with one member of each couple. But a "new" style of interactions has also emerged, the *Cocoon* style, characterized at once by couple self-enclosure, fusion, and relatively undifferentiated conjugal roles.

Conjugal interaction styles and social milieu

Are conjugal interaction styles still sensitive to social milieu? To answer this question, three major variable types must be distinguished. First, couple's *resources*, either in the form of cultural capital as measured by woman's education level,⁷ or economic capital as measured by house-

⁷Man's educational level produces the same results and is strongly associated with woman's (gamma = .36; sig < .0001).

hold's monthly income. Second, since several researchers have hypothesized that couples whose members differ greatly in terms of cultural or economic resources but also ideological or axiological orientations and religious practices develop specific interaction styles (Bitter 1986; Blood and Wolfe 1960; Lewis and Spanier 1979), we took into account various *heterogamy* indicators.

Several indicators associated with *conjugal trajectory* were also tested: union type (matrimonial or consensual), union rank (coming after a divorce or not), family blending (indicated by presence of children with one other parent); occupational activity and phase in family life were included as control variables. The effects of independent variables on conjugal interaction styles are presented together in a multinomial regression table calculated under SPSS (Appendix, Table 1V). Each effect is assessed by statistically controlling for the effects of other variables in the model. The odds ratios associated with the values of each independent variable are compared with their reference categories, chosen by the mode, and the *Association* style chosen as reference category for the dependent variable.

Cultural resources have a strong impact on interaction style. Couples with low educational capital are much more likely to function in *Parallel*, *Bastion*, or *Cocoon* style, whereas couples with a high educational level are more likely to develop an *Association* style. Economic resources also have a strong effect. *Parallel*, *Bastion*, and *Cocoon*-style couples are underrepresented in high-income categories to the benefit of *Association*-style couples, while *Bastion* and *Cocoon*-style couples are overrepresented compared to *Association*-style in low-income categories. Interaction style thus depends fairly strongly even today on cultural and economic resources, even when the effects of variables associated with life course are controlled for. However, heterogamy in education level has no significant effect on interaction style. The same is true for age, cultural and religious heterogamy, which all proved non-significant in our successive models (not presented here). The hypothesis that there are interaction styles specific to couples marked by socio-cultural differences is therefore invalidated.

What are the effects of the set of variables associated with family itinerary? Paid employment has a highly significant effect on interaction style: employed women are significantly less likely than non-employed women to be in a *Parallel*, *Bastion*, or *Cocoon*-style couple. Both partners working full time is favorable to *Companionship* and *Association* interaction styles, a result confirmed when family life phase is taken into account: the *Association* style is overrepresented during the pre-child stage, when women are usually occupied, whereas in the pre-school phase, when percentage of women in occupational activity drops considerably, *Bastion* and *Cocoon* styles increase very significantly. Thus, the arrival of children is a strong constraint, but child age has very little influence (no effect for school and post-school phases). For couples in the post-parent phase, however, the probability of having a *Companionship*, *Bastion*, or *Cocoon* style increases significantly.

Does having a relatively “choppy” biographical trajectory affect conjugal interaction style? Non-married couples reject the *Companionship* style in favor of *Association*. The fact that a couple has cumulatively experienced one or several divorces has no significant effect, however. Nonetheless, family blending is very clearly associated with rejection of the *Association* style, essentially in favor of the *Parallel* style but also, to a lesser degree, of *Bastion* and *Cocoon* styles. Second unions, then, are characterized by relatively strong self-enclosure.

Interaction styles and conjugal conflict

Are conjugal interaction styles distinguished from each other in terms of specific conflicts and problems? Conjugal problems were approached by a series of 20 indicators revealing presence or absence of major disagreement between partners with regard to aims of conjugal life, division of labor, communication, child-raising, sexuality, etc. (see Survey Question 21). Multiple correspondence analysis done with SPAD (1999) shows that these problems can be grouped into three categories: conjugal violence and addiction (drug or alcohol consumption), problems in coordinating conjugal or family activities (how to coordinate schedules, find common practices or rhythms, establish satisfactory division of domestic labor, etc.), and relational or interaction problems (communication, affects, difficulty accepting the other's personality, etc.).

Table V (in the Appendix) presents a series of logistic regressions (SPSS); dependent variables are 1) presence or absence in conjugal life of each of these three categories of problems, 2) frequency of conjugal quarreling, and how serious quarrels are (see Survey Questions 25 and 26).⁸ For each of the variables, effect of conjugal interaction style is estimated by statistically controlling for effects of social status and life course. Models I, II, and III show that problems of violence and addiction, and of relations and coordination, are significantly associated with interaction styles. *Companionship*, *Bastion*, and *Cocoon* styles show significantly lower levels of all types of problems than *Association* style, chosen as reference category. *Parallel* is not differentiated from *Association*; frequency of the various problems is identical in the two cases. *Companionship*-style couples are least likely to experience conjugal problems. Models IV and V give similar results for quarreling: *Association* and *Parallel*-style couples are more likely to quarrel than *Cocoon*, *Bastion*, and *Companionship*-style ones, and more likely to deem such quarrels serious.

Interaction styles give rise to highly unequal levels of conjugal conflict. Those characterized by emphasis on autonomy (*Association* style) and even more so by a combination of autonomy, couple self-enclosure, and role differentiation (*Parallel* style) show high levels of problems and quarreling. But are these observations due to the fact that *Companionship* couples are overrepresented in the post-children phase and therefore have successfully passed through the preceding phases of family life? If so, this interaction style would have those properties not because of its structural specificities but its generational position, or even as an effect of the selection bias mentioned above, linked to divorce and separation. However, this hypothesis is invalidated by the fact that effect of interaction styles was estimated by controlling for effects of variables associated with life course (family life phase, separation or divorce, blended family or not, etc.). A series of complementary analyses using trivariate statistical control shows that the link between interaction style and level of problems and quarreling is maintained across the different phases of family life: regardless of the life phase that *Bastion*, *Companionship*, and *Cocoon*-style couples are in, they present significantly fewer problems and lower levels of quarreling than *Association* and *Parallel*-style couples.

⁸Conjugal quarreling is termed "frequent" when it occurs more than once a month (22% of cases), "serious" when it is said to be so by at least one couple member (32% of cases).

Conjugal conflict resolution modes

On the basis of these results we can hypothesize that interaction style has a significant effect on conflict resolution mode. Psychosociological research into how families deal with conflict is structured by two dimensions: coping with a problem implies taking actions to resolve it—the “action” dimension—and relations with partner in the aim of resolving it: the “relation” dimension.

The *action dimension* should itself be broken down, into importance of information and communication in the decision-making process and degree of emotional restraint and active solution-seeking. The *relation dimension* also has to be grasped through several components: partners’ aggressiveness (Is problem-handling associated with intrusive, aggressive relations?), amount of support, and propensity to escape (Do partners try to interact with each other or do they avoid interaction?). Here we used an SPAD (1999) ascending hierarchical classification analysis (Ward’s method) based on 20 indicators for approaching the seven dimensions (see Survey Questions 23 and 24) that allows for distinguishing five modes of coping (Table III).

Couples with an *active* coping mode (28%) show a high level of emotional restraint, communication, and information, low aggressiveness, and low avoidance. They try to negotiate their relations actively, and support each other when a problem arises. The woman is more active in this mode than the man. Like active-mode couples, couples with a *passive* coping mode (20%) reject aggressive and avoidance strategies but they are characterized by a low level of communication and support. While not using negative strategies, they do not actively seek to resolve their problems. The coping mode we call *male unilateral* (20%) combines a strong tendency in women to be aggressive, withdrawn, low on emotional restraint and the opposite tendencies in men. In this coping mode, partners have extremely different strategies, the man being more positive and active than the woman. In the coping mode we called *female unilateral* (18%), the man is much less active than the woman, showing a tendency to withdraw without being markedly aggressive. Female unilateral mode is thus not the reverse image of male unilateral: it is characterized by man’s disengagement and woman’s relative engagement in conflict management. Lastly, in couples with an *aggressive* coping mode (17%), both partners show marked aggressiveness, emotional imbalance, and low levels of support and communication.

Table III *Distribution of indicators by mode of coping with problems/problem-handling mode (%); result of ascending hierarchical classification analysis (Ward’s method)*

Partner referred to⁹ / Active/ Passive / Male unilateral / Female unilateral / Aggressive /Cramer’s V

Category size

Action dimension

Much information M

⁹To avoid the bias associated with self-evaluation on a subject as sensitive as problem-handling mode, each partner was asked to state the conflict managing mode used by the other; the man described the woman’s behavior, the woman the man’s.

		W
Strong communication		M
	W	
Strong emotional restraint	M	
		W
High activity	M	
		W

Relation dimension

Very aggressive

Strong support

Strong avoidance

Reading: W = man's response about woman's mode; M = woman's response about man's mode;
** = significant at $p < .01$

An SPSS multinomial regression with aggressive coping mode as reference and including all control variables confirms the hypothesis of homology between conflict-handling modes and conjugal interaction styles (see Appendix, Table VI). *Parallel* and *Association*-style couples are more likely to have an aggressive or male unilateral coping mode while *Companionship*-style couples are more likely to favor the active mode. The passive mode is specific first and foremost to *Cocoon*-style couples, and to a lesser degree *Bastion*-style couples. Female unilateral is uniformly spread across conjugal interaction styles. A series of complementary analyses reveal that the relation between conflict-handling mode and interaction style is maintained over the life course: *Bastion* and *Cocoon*-style couples in whatever phase of family life are most likely to have a passive coping mode, while *Parallel* and *Association*-style couples try to resolve their problems more often in aggressive or female unilateral mode. In all family life phases the *Companionship* style is associated with active coping. The link between interaction styles and conflict-handling modes therefore does not express a cohort effect or selection bias.

Interaction styles and evaluation of conjugal relationship quality

It is important to distinguish between evaluation of the quality of conjugal relations defined as a more or less positive personal judgment made by spouses or partners about their union and the relational processes that underlie that evaluation, such as problems and open conflict (Finchman and Bradbury 1987). In some couples, conjugal conflict co-exists with a relatively high level of satisfaction whereas in others it is linked to a sharply negative evaluation of conjugal life.

Quality of conjugal relations was approached by means of four series of indicators: 1) intention to separate, measured by asking each partner if he or she had ever thought of separating; 2) overall conjugal satisfaction, measured by asking each spouse to indicate his or her degree of satisfaction with conjugal life in general; 3) conjugal satisfaction by area, referring to several specific areas of conjugal life, such as division of domestic labor, conjugal atmosphere, mutual consideration and coordination between spouses; 4) partner's symptoms of depression, approached by a series of indicators such as feelings of loneliness, fear, aggressiveness, etc. (Radloff 1977, Hautzinger 1988) (dimensions approached by Survey Questions 58, 65, and 69).

Table VII (in the Appendix) shows a series of logistic regressions (SPSS); dependent variables are conjugal dissatisfaction, intention to separate, and depression symptoms. In each case male and female responses are distinguished.¹⁰ Once again, the effect of conjugal interaction style was estimated for each dependent variable while controlling for effects of social status and life course.

Both men and women in *Bastion*, *Cocoon*, and *Companionship*-style couples show a significantly lower dissatisfaction level than *Association*-style couples. *Parallel*-style couples are not significantly different in this respect from *Association*-style couples. *Companionship* couples have the lowest levels of dissatisfaction, while *Cocoon* and *Bastion* couples have intermediate scores. Identical results were obtained for intention to separate. Depression symptoms also confirm these results, except on one point: only *Companionship*-style couples were significantly different from *Association*-style couples.¹¹

* * *

Conjugal interaction styles today diverge by degree of emphasis placed on individual autonomy or the group, openness or couple self-enclosure, relatively egalitarian, flexible organizing of power and roles or on the contrary essentially statutory regulation. Empirical analysis reveals that these dimensions are largely independent of each other. Fusional cohesion is not necessarily synonymous with inegalitarian, sex-typed regulation. In this respect, family communitarianism has often been confused with statutory and sex-typed role division; *Cocoon* and above all *Companionship* interaction styles show that the primacy of “we the family” or “we the couple” over “I the individual” (Kellerhals et al. 1982) is on the contrary compatible with equality within the couple (Pyke and Bengtson 1996). It is therefore inadequate to claim equivalency between autonomy and equality by setting up an opposition between “modern” or “post-modern” couples favoring a contractual, autonomizing, egalitarian relation and “traditional” ones where the group dictates its law to individuals while assigning them to rigid, unequal statuses. Likewise it has been thought, namely under the influence of clinical cases, that couples or families who keep very much to themselves are necessarily fusional. The facts show that many couples (*Parallel* interaction style) combine strong emphasis on individual autonomy as a structuring principle of internal relations with an unequivocal affirmation of the necessity of group self-enclosure. The relatively equal prevalence of the five conjugal interaction styles confirms the thesis that for the family, modernity with regard to interaction structures is characterized by multiple models, and this is a particularly strong confirmation given that it is founded on an inductive statistical method and a representative sample that covers the entire conjugal life course and social structure and that it simul-

¹⁰We dichotomized the three evaluation measures. “Fairly good,” “neither good nor bad,” “rather bad” and “outright bad” responses were distinguished from the “really good” response (50% of men and women) in measuring overall satisfaction with conjugal life. With regard to separation plans, we distinguished between individuals who had never thought of separating and those who said they had thought of it (19% of men, 29% of women). The depression scale was dichotomized at a score of 16 (out of 24, indicating total absence of depression symptoms). 23% of women and 14% of men show symptoms of depression.

¹¹Just as for conjugal conflict and modes of coping, relations between interaction styles and conjugal life evaluation indicators remain statistically significant when effects of life-course-related variables are controlled for. Regardless of current family life phase, significantly higher satisfaction levels are found in *Bastion*, *Companionship*, and *Cocoon*-style couples than the others.

taneously takes responses of both couple members into account. The hypothesis that conjugal interaction is becoming standardized around a single model is thus invalidated to a large degree.

Moreover, style plurality does not point to weaker relevance of the social structure in conjugal relations. Social status continues to have a highly significant influence on conjugal interaction styles: the valuing of partner autonomy is particularly strong in milieus well endowed with economic and cultural capital; couples with modest economic and cultural resources are more likely to value the group, consensus, and partner similarity. Couple's relation to environment is also very different by social milieu: autonomy in strong-capital couples goes together with valuing exchanges with the outside, exchanges perceived as essential to the couple's internal dialogue, whereas the fusional style, more readily found among working-class couples, is associated with relative couple self-enclosure, the couple's withdrawal then considered a necessary condition for maintaining conjugal balance. This does not mean that centrality of consensus and similarity in couples with low socio-cultural capital is synonymous with equal power for spouses or non-differentiated roles. Quite the contrary, sex-specific conjugal functioning is very strong in working-class milieus. Regulation characterized by strong differentiation of functional and relational roles, decision-making power, and dependency are stronger in such couples than others.

Lastly, while interaction styles are distributed unevenly across the social structure, they also have their own particular properties. Conjugal conflict is particularly strong in *Parallel* and *Association* interaction styles and the members of such couples are more likely to deem conjugal relation quality low and to show symptoms of depression. These results suggest several questions as to the strengths and weaknesses of the orientations underlying couple interaction patterns. They have to do first and foremost with "conjugal individualism," a philosophy positing that the couple's essential purpose and the only justification for its endurance is to be a source of enriching personal development for autonomous individuals. In its pure form, conjugal individualism denies all notions of obligation toward spouse, except that of honest, open communication (Bellah et al. 1986; Giddens 1992, 1994). *Association*-style couples put this conjugal philosophy into practice in "exemplary" manner; the fact is that they show as having the most intense conjugal problems. These results make it reasonable to doubt that broader, more open and honest communication can overcome the disintegrative effects of individualism (Bellah et al. 1986). It is fair to ask whether the quest for authenticity and autonomy (Singly 1996) practiced by such couples doesn't actually hurt the integrity of the family group. Of course many *Association*-style couples experience this "conjugal modernity" daily as a source of optimism and mobility that marks a real break from couplehood ruled by arguments in terms of authority and that frees them from routine and gender inequality; they would energetically affirm the absolute necessity of total, permanent communication between autonomous partners who always listen to each other's preferences and interests and master their feelings. But a number of other couples taking inspiration from this philosophy cannot manage to get close to the ideal, and move along into degraded forms of the relation with the other, relationships marked by avoidance and even aggression, relationships that produce chronic dissatisfaction. Taking self-development and discovery as an essential justification for the couple or family life in general does not make it easy for couple or family to endure, probably because of all the possibilities of affective distancing offered by partners' divergent occupational, demographic, or relational agendas, all of which are inherent in contemporary society. We can hypothesize that the problems created by this model of relations also fuel it, by giving partners in conflict an incentive to stake still stronger claims to recognition of their personal rights and prerogatives.

Second, there is the gap between the contemporary couple's ideal of equality and negotiation and the persistence of inequalities between men and women with regard to domestic work and occupational integration. A great many couples (*Bastion* and *Parallel* styles) are still characterized by deep inequalities that extend in many cases beyond functional roles to relational ones and the distribution of decision-making power. It is in *Parallel*-style couples that the gap between egalitarian aspirations and daily reality is the strongest, because this style is based on individual autonomy while being structured by strong gender inequalities. There is thus a price to pay for differentiation of roles and powers by sex when not counterbalanced by fusional-type cohesion (as in the *Bastion* style): woman's ill-being and, by ricochet no doubt, conjugal dissatisfaction for both partners.

Privatization is the third danger for contemporary families. Nearly twenty years ago some of us were already pointing out the danger associated with the hypertrophy of the conjugal tie (Kellerhals, Troutot, Lazega [1984] 1993). Erosion of public sociability, increased attention focused on the child, and segregation of places of work and residence produce overexpectations of what couplehood can be and do and greatly increase the attention focused on it, when in fact a certain border porosity is necessary to couple equilibrium (Olson and McCubbin 1989). If the couple is the meaning-producing group *par excellence*, it is to be hoped that other primary groups—the kinship group and ideally the work world or civic community—second it in this process.

The tendencies just mentioned threaten contemporary couples because they make them incapable of handling their problems and conflicts, especially if several such tendencies are combined in the same couple. In *Association* or *Parallel*-style couples, conflicts and problems are more likely to give rise to an inadequate coping mode, with both partners showing extremely high levels of aggressiveness and emotional imbalance and low levels of support and communication in attempts to resolve them. *Companionship*-style couples, on the contrary, favor a communicative coping mode in which they tell each other of their differences while *Bastion* and *Cocoon*-style couples are likely to have more passive coping modes where the aim is to avoid conflict rather than resolve it. In this sense, coping modes can be thought of as an extension of interaction styles: coping mode diffuses general interaction style logic and reinforces its effects.

The three risks mentioned above are not distributed at random; each has its target population, readily identifiable. Conjugal individualism is specific to middle and upper manager milieus, while couple self-enclosure and sex-typed roles are more likely to be found in working-class milieus. This means that each situation is marked by specific contradictions and tensions. It also means that it is mistaken to characterize the modern family—familial modernity—in terms of a single type of evolution and still more wrong to think of it as having a single destiny with uniform functional consequences. Lastly, it means it is mistaken to assume that the impact of social structures on contemporary family relations is dissolving.

Éric WIDMER

Centre Lémanique d'Etudes des Parcours et Modes de Vie (PAVIE)

Université de Lausanne

Bâtiment Provence

1015 Lausanne CH – Switzerland

eric.widmer@unil.ch

Jean KELLERHALS

Centre Lémanique d'Etudes des Parcours et Modes de Vie (PAVIE)
Département de Sociologie
Faculté des Sciences Economiques et Sociales
Université de Genève
102, boulevard Carl-Vogt – 1211 Genève 4 CH - Switzerland
jean.kellerhals@socio.unige.ch

René LEVY

Centre Lémanique d'Etudes des Parcours et Modes de Vie (PAVIE)
Université de Lausanne
Bâtiment Provence
1015 Lausanne CH – Switzerland
Rene.Levy@unil.ch

APPENDIX

Several scales were used to constitute interaction styles

Fusion (versus autonomy) index

To measure degree of fusion, a scale was constructed that combined fusion indicator scores (Survey Question 6) for women and men separately. Fusion scales were then dichotomized at the median, thereby distinguishing between strongly fusional couples and medium or weakly fusional couples.

Couple self-enclosure (versus openness) index

Degree of couple self-enclosure was measured by six statements (Survey Question 7). Each question was recoded so that the highest score indicated highest degree of couple self-enclosure. Two scales were then determined, one for men, one for women, and dichotomized at the median.

Internal (versus external) orientation

The internal orientation index used Survey Question 8 indicators. Internally oriented individuals cited the three statements indicating such orientation.

Differentiation of functional roles

Here the point was to measure degree of sex differentiation of functional roles using an index for proportion of household tasks performed by the woman (Survey Question 12). Paper work (taxes, bills, accounts) and repairs were given half the weight of other tasks because they are less heavy; the index thereby constructed was then dichotomized to distinguish cases of massive female over-investment (woman does three-quarters or more of household tasks) from others. In 57% of cases women do three-quarters or more of these tasks; in 43% they do less.

Differentiation of relational roles

To have a synthetic means of measuring couple's tendency to differentiate relational roles by sex,

we counted “equally, it depends” responses from women to Survey Question 18. The index ranges from minimum 0 (= woman says no role played equally by both sexes) to 7 (= woman says all roles non-differentiated). We then distinguished between cases characterized by sharp sex-typing (4-7 roles differentially distributed ; 63% of couples) from cases characterized by medium or weak sex-typing (37%).

Differentiation in decision-making power was measured by counting women’s responses to Survey Question 16. By adding together cases of unequal distribution of power for each decision-making area, we distinguished couples where these areas are distributed in highly differentiated manner (with one or the other partner dominating in each) from couples where decision-making power is egalitarianly distributed. To isolate sharply hierarchized couples we chose a relatively high cut-off point: couples are considered sharply hierarchized if power is unevenly shared in four out of the six areas. This was the case in 23% of our sample couples.

To describe master status normativity we distinguished between cases in which only one of the partners was supposed to change his or her plans or commitments in case of a serious disturbance (strong, 50% of cases) from cases where the two partners were supposed to change their plans (weak , 50% of cases). Men’s responses were favored here (Survey Question 13).

Routinization of family life was measured by a cumulative index. One randomly chosen partner was asked to answer questions on this dimension, so half of both sexes responded to Question 14. Overall, the routinization scores can be considered balanced: median and average were both fixed at 8 on a scale of 0 (maximum routinization) to 18 (minimum routinization). In the following analyses we use a simplified version of the dichotomous variable that distinguishes strong and weak levels of routinization in relation to the median.

Table IV *Conjugal interaction styles: multinomial regression on various social status and life-course indicators*

%¹² Parallel Companionship Bastion Cocoon

*Woman’s education level*¹³

Compulsory

Secondary, no degree

Apprenticeship (short)

Apprenticeship (medium)

Apprenticeship (long)

Higher occupational training

¹²Column specifies independent variable distributions.

¹³ **The terms we use may not be familiar to all readers. They correspond to the Swiss system of vocational training (fairly similar to systems in Germany and Austria) with dual or all-school education on an apprenticeship level and an intermediate (up to now called “higher”) level. A professional university level (Higher specialized studies) was added very recently (too recently to be present in our data); compulsory, maturity and university levels are oriented toward general and not occupational education.**

Baccalaureat, Maturity

University

Couple's monthly income (Swiss francs)

≤ 4000

4001-6000

6001-8000 (ref)

8001-10000

>10000

Education level heterogamy

Heterogamy

Homogamy

Woman's occupational situation (% of fulltime)

Not employed

< 50%

50-89%

90-100%

Family life phases

Pre-child

Pre-school

School age (ref)

Post-school

Post-child

Couples without children

Married or cohabiting

Cohabiting

Married (ref)

First or second union

At least one partner previously divorced

Neither partner previously divorced (ref)

Blended family or not

Yes

No (ref)

Goodness-of-fit (X) [**← c'est bête mais pour l'instant je n'ai pas trouvé cette CH grecque dans mon système**] = 340 **, df = 92, Cox and Snell .22, Nagelkerke .23, McFadden .08

% of cases correctly predicted: 37%

** = sig < .01, * = sig < .05

Table V *Conflict indicators: logistic regression on conjugal interaction styles and various social structuration variables*

- I. Problems of violence and addiction
- II. Relational problems
- III. Coordination problems
- IV. Frequent quarreling
- V. Serious or very serious quarreling

Conjugal interaction style

Companionship

Cocoon

Bastion

Parallel

Association

Woman's educational level

Compulsory

Secondary, no degree

Apprenticeship (short)

Apprenticeship (medium)

Apprenticeship (long)

Higher occupational training

Baccalaureat, Maturity

University

Couple's monthly income

≤ 4000

4001-6000

6001-8000 (ref)

8001-10000

> Δ10000

Education level heterogamy

Homogamy

Woman's occupational situation (% of full time)

Not employed

< 50%

50-89%

90-100%

Family life phase

Pre-child

Pre-school

School age

Post-school

Post-child
Couples without children

Cohabiting

Married

At least one partner previously divorced

Neither partner previously divorced

Blended family

Non-blended family

Goodness-of-fit (X)

Increase (ΔX)

Cox and Snell

% of cases correctly predicted

** = sig < .01, * = sig < .05

Table VI *Conflict resolution modes: multinomial regression on conjugal interaction styles and various social structuration variables*

Active Passive Female unilateral Male unilateral

Conjugal interaction style

Companionship

Cocoon

Bastion

Parallel

Association

Woman's educational level

Compulsory

Secondary, no degree

Apprenticeship (short)

Apprenticeship (medium)

Apprenticeship (long)

Higher occupational training

Baccalaureat, Maturity

University

Couple's monthly income (Swiss francs)

≤ 4000

4001-6000

6001-8000

8001-10000

> 10000

Education level heterogamy

Heterogamy

Homogamy

Woman's occupational situation (% of full time)

Not employed

< 50%

50-89%

90-100%

Family life phases

Pre-child

Pre-school

School age

Post-school

Post-child

Couples without children

Married or cohabiting

Cohabiting

Married

First or second union

At least one partner previously divorced

Neither partner previously divorced

Blended family or not

Yes

No

** = sig < .01, * = sig < .05

Table VII *Conjugal and psychological evaluation indicators: logistic regression on conjugal interaction styles and various social structuration variables*

[À l'horizontale]

Conjugal dissatisfaction, Woman

Conjugal dissatisfaction, Man

Intention to separate, Woman

Intention to separate, Man

Depression symptoms, Woman

Depression symptoms, Man

Conjugal interaction style

Companionship
Cocoon
Bastion
Parallel
Association

Woman's education level

Compulsory
Secondary, no degree
Apprenticeship (short)
Apprenticeship (middle)
Apprenticeship (long)
Higher occupational training
Baccalaureat, Maturity
University

Couple's monthly income (Swiss francs)

≤ 4000
4001-6000
6001-8000 (ref)
8001-10000
> 10000

Education level heterogamy

Homogamy

Woman's occupation situation (% of full-time)

Not employed
< 50%
50-89%
90-100%

Family life phases

Pre-child
Pre-school
School age
Post-school
Post-child
Couples without children

Cohabiting

Married
At least one partner previously divorced
Neither partner previously divorced

Blended family
Non-blended family

Goodness-of-fit (**X**)
df
Cox and Snell
% of cases correctly predicted

** = sig < .01, * = sig < .05