

## Marital Quality and Family Configurations

Eric D. Widmer

Dpt of Sociology, University of Geneva

### Introduction

Relatives and friends often have strong feelings and concerns about what happens to couples, as marital dyads are at the very core of interpersonal contexts. Relatives and friends can be a resource that promotes marital quality. Support from relatives and friends may however foster tension and conflict within marriage because it interferes in marital issues. This section presents some studies about the interrelation between marital quality, personal networks and family configurations beyond the nuclear family.

### Personal networks and conjugal dyads

A large number of studies have identified the contribution of personal networks to couples (Widmer, 2004). Contemporary couples are not isolates. They keep regular contacts with relatives and friends, and several kinds of exchanges exist with them. Those contacts and exchanges, are however limited in various ways (Coenen-Huther et al., 1994). Network support only concerns a small number of persons, mostly drawn from the couple's parents and siblings. It is provided in specific instances of the life course rather than on a long-term basis. It comes from a history of shared experiences and reciprocal help, rather than from stringent norms of responsibility. Indeed, there is a primacy of the conjugal dyad over ties with the extended family, as normative expectations as well as actual solidarity are at their highest in marital relationships.

This is not to say that personal networks do not matter for conjugal dyads. Scholars have stressed the importance of functional and structural features of personal networks for marital quality. Functionally, greater support from network members is associated with larger marital quality (Bryant & Conger, 1999; Burger & Milardo, 1995; Felmler, 2001). In structural terms, many relationships are not shared by both spouses in a couple but are specific to each of them. Scholars have investigated the extent to which individuals in one partner's network overlap with members of the other partner's network (Milardo, 1986; Surra, 1988). Spouses with more overlapping networks, i.e., with a large number of similar network members, report on average greater marital quality (Stein et al., 1992), with persistent effects through time (Kearns & Leonard, 2004).

A series of publications made in Switzerland on 1500 couples have focused on the link between personal networks and marital quality by stressing the impact of networks' functional and structural features (Widmer et al., 2003; Widmer et al., 2006; Widmer et al., 2009). A typology was constructed that showed significant correlations with marital quality. Couples with bicentric networks were characterized by strong kinship and friendship ties for both partners, who had large number of friends and relatives around and frequent contacts with them. Both partners would get support from their network members in the case they would need it. Overall, couples with bicentric reported higher marital quality than those with only a few sources of support, or those with a structural imbalance (such as when one partner's relatives and friends were overrepresented). These results confirmed other studies supporting the hypothesis that the pattern of interdependencies characterizing personal networks is interrelated with marital quality (Widmer et al., 2009).

The mechanisms by which interpersonal networks impact on marital quality are still not well known. Network effects are in part accounted for by couples' conflict management strategies. These strategies are more often based on communication and negotiation in couples embedded in bicentric networks than in other types of personal networks (Widmer et al., 2009). The presence of active relatives and friends on both partners' sides may reinforce a marriage in a variety of ways. They may strengthen the partners' psychological well-being and self-worth by providing alternative responses to needs for empathy and emotional attachment. They may also reduce any strains from the contradiction between the ideal of marriage and its actuality, and they may promote the emotional attachment and normative commitment that are necessary for a stable marriage (Helms et al., 2003; Oliner, 1989). The identity and activities of partners as parents were also found to be strengthened by bicentric networks (Widmer et al., 2006).

### **Network interference**

If support from personal networks usually exert a positive effect, some research found that there were negative aspects of social networks as well (Bertera, 2005; Holman, 1981; Johnson & Milardo, 1984). The interference model states that strong networks may actually increase conjugal conflict, because the emergence of conjugal problems result in more attempts at controlling or impacting a couple's relationship from network members (Johnson & Milardo, 1984). These attempts may in turn increase any conflict between spouses. For example, third-party intervention in an existing conjugal conflict may reinforce partners' "self-righteousness," and may thus make a consensual solution less likely (Klein & Milardo, 2000a). Husbands report greater marital conflict and ambivalence in conjugal relationships when wives interact frequently with friends rather than with relatives (Burger & Milardo, 1995). In fact, overall, social support has negative consequences if it is perceived by partners as a control or an interference attempt (Holman, 1981; Johnson & Milardo, 1984; Widmer et al., 2009).

The impact of network interference on marital quality may be explained by a variety of mechanisms (Bryant & Conger, 1999). One is related to couples' conflict management strategies. Couples embedded in supportive networks with interference exhibited less ability to solve problems on their own, and therefore a higher probability of decreased marital quality. When interference is present, a variety of negative mechanisms may emerge. For example, a decrease in one or both partners' self-worth and self-efficacy can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies about a couple's inability to deal with problems on their own (Widmer, 2004). Or a couple's problems may become exacerbated if one or both partners become overly dependent on external perceptions of their conjugal interactions (Bryant & Conger, 1999; Klein & Milardo, 2000b). Overall, interference as a form of control on conjugal processes tilt the balance of power between partners (Klein & Milardo, 2000b) and between partners and their relatives, and may thus tend to foster conflicts and stress in the conjugal dyad.

### **Family configurations**

Various evidence support the hypothesis that marital quality does not only play out in the partnership but in personal networks as well. Overall, the literature on marital quality and personal networks is in line with the configurational perspective on families. Marital processes to some extent depend on various other family ties from which couples draw resources, but which may also put them at risk of conflict and tension by interfering in their daily lives. The configurational perspective on families posits that conjugal dyads must be referred to their family network in order to

be understood (Widmer, 2010). It stresses on one hand that conjugal processes are shaped by interdependencies with children, parents, siblings and possibly extended family members. On the other hand, these patterns of interdependencies depend to some extent on exchanges of various kinds happening in conjugal dyads (Widmer, 2004). Therefore, instead of focusing on the amount of support couples derive from their larger family, the configurational perspective stresses the complex patterns of interdependencies, both positive and negative, that link marital quality with the couple's family context.

In a research dedicated to family recomposition after divorce, the import of such family configurations for marital quality and parenting was stressed (Widmer et al., 2012). Three hundred women, who had a biological child and lived with a partner, were interviewed, half of them belonging to a stepfamily, half to a first-time family. A free-listing technique was used to delineate the family configurations of respondents (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Levin, 1993; Widmer, 2006). Respondents were asked to provide a list of all individuals whom they considered to be significant family members at the time of the interview. The term "family" was deliberately left undefined to gather their own meaning of what is a family. Participants were instructed that the term "significant" referred to people who have played a role, either positive or negative, in their life during the past year. Cluster analysis was used on the lists of family members provided by the interviewees to construct six types of family configurations. Individuals in Friendship configurations focused on friends who were considered to be family members. Individuals in In-law configurations had a strong orientation toward the partner and the in-laws. Partner and partner's mother were overrepresented, as well as other in-law relationships. Brother and Sister configurations included the respondent's siblings and their children and current partners. Kinship configurations included a variety of individuals related by blood and marriage, such as partners, parents, children, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, cousins, and grandparents. Beanpole configurations (Bengston et al., 1990) focused on blood relatives, with the inclusion of members of various generations, particularly grandparents from the mother's and the father's side. It was vertically, rather than horizontally oriented, contrary to the Brothers and Sisters configurations. Nuclear family configurations were almost exclusively centered around the partner and the children. It corresponded to a definition of the family as a coresident unit. Without partner and Post-divorce configurations were only found in the stepfamily subsample. Without partner configurations did not include the present partner as a significant family member, although he lived, as in all other types, within the same household as the respondent and her child. Post-divorce configurations had two sets of family members: one toward the former partner and his relatives and the other toward the new partner and his relatives (including his children and, in some cases, his ex-partner).

Interestingly, those six configurations present unequal levels of marital quality. Stepfamilies in which interdependencies have been rebuilt around the new partner, such as in In-law family configurations and Nuclear family configurations, show a high level of marital satisfaction. In those cases, the new partner plays a key role in the family configuration whereas the previous partner (and coparent with the respondent) has a marginal status in the family configuration. In particular, coparenting relationships (McHale, 1997) with the previous partner are weak. To the opposite, in Post-divorce family configurations, the current partner has a marginal role and the previous partner, in his status of parent of the child, has a much greater relational centrality. This configuration of interdependencies produces lower marital satisfaction but a higher involvement of both previous partners in their coparenting relationship (Widmer et al., 2012). Those and similar results suggest that individuals who

experienced family recomposition after a divorce have quite distinct configurations of interdependencies with a large pool of family members to choose from, with consequences for marital satisfaction.

### Conclusions

Research on marital satisfaction should pay greater attention to both support and conflict that partners develop outside marriage (Bradbury et al., 2000). Relationships with parents, siblings and other family members, as well as with friends, significantly relate with marital quality. Not only direct connections between partners and their family members and friends matter, but the overall organization of family interdependencies in family configurations. There is an obvious need for further research on marital quality within family configurations and personal networks.

### References

- Bengston, L., V., Rosenthal, C., & Burton, L. (1990). Families and aging: Diversity and heterogeneity. In R. Binstock & L. George (Eds.), *Handbook of aging and social sciences* (p. 263-287. New York). 263-287. New York: Academic Press.
- Bertera, E. M. (2005). Mental health in u.s. adults: The role of positive social support and social negativity in personal relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 22(1), 33-48.
- Bradbury, T., Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. H. (2000). Research on the nature of marital satisfaction: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), 964-980.
- Bryant, C. M., & Conger, R. D. (1999). Marital success and domains of social support in long-term relationships: Does the influence of network members ever end? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 61(2), 437-450.
- Burger, E., & Milardo, R. M. (1995). Marital interdependence and social networks. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 12(3), 403-415.
- Cherlin, A. J., & Furstenberg, F. F. (1994). Stepfamilies in the us: a reconsideration. *Annual Review of Sociology*(20), 359-381.
- Coenen-Huther, J., Kellerhals, J., & Allmen, M. von. (1994). *Les réseaux de solidarité dans la famille*. Lausanne: Réalités sociales.
- Felmlee, H., D. (2001). No couple is an island: A social network perspective on dyadic stability. *Social Forces*, 79(4), 1259-1287.
- Helms, H. M., Crouter, A. C., & McHale, S. M. (2003). Marital Quality and Spouses' Marriage Work With Close Friends and Each Other. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65(4), 963-977.
- Holman, T. B. (1981). The influence of community involvement on marital quality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 143-149.
- Johnson, J., M., & Milardo, M., R. (1984). Network interference in pair relationships: A social psychological recasting of Slater's theory of social regression. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 46(4), 893-899.
- Kearns, J. N., & Leonard, K. E. (2004, Jun). Social networks, structural interdependence, and marital quality over the transition to marriage: a prospective analysis. *Journal of family psychology : JFP : journal of the Division of Family Psychology of the American Psychological Association (Division 43)*, 18(2), 383-95.
- Klein, R. C. A., & Milardo, R. M. (2000a). The social context of couple conflict: Support and criticism from informal third parties. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 17, 618-637.
- Klein, R. C. A., & Milardo, R. M. (2000b). The social context of couple conflict: Support and criticism from informal third parties. *Journal of Social and*

- Personal Relationships*(17), 618-637.
- Levin, I. (1993). Family as mapped realities. *Journal of Family Issues*, 14(1), 82-91.
- McHale, J. (1997). Overt and covert coparenting processes in the family. *Family Process*(36), 183-210.
- Milardo, M., R. (1986). Personal choice and social constraint in close relationships: Applications of network analysis. In V. J. Derlega & B. A. . Winstead (Eds.), *Friendship and social interaction* (p. 145-166). New York: Springer Verlag.
- Oliker, J., S. (1989). *Best friends and marriage. exchange among women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stein, C. H., Bush, E. G., Ross, R. R., & Ward, M. (1992). Mine, yours and ours: A configural analysis of the networks of married couples in relation to marital satisfaction and individual well-being. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 365-383.
- Surra, A., C. (1988). The influence of the interactive network on developing relationships. In R. M. e. Milardo (Ed.), *Families and social networks* (p. 48-82.). Newbury Park: Sage.
- Widmer, E., Kellerhals, J., & Levy, R. (2006). Types of conjugal interactions and conjugal conflict: a longitudinal assessment. *European sociological review*, 22(1), 79-89.
- Widmer, E., Kellerhals, J., Levy, R., Ernst, M., & Hammer, R. (2003). *Couples contemporains: CohÃ©sion, rÃ©gulation et conflits. une enquÃªte sociologique*. Zurich: Seismo.
- Widmer, (2004). Couples and their networks. In M. Richards, J. Scott, & J. Treas (Eds.), *Blackwell companion to the sociology of families* (p. 356-373). London: Blackwell publisher.
- Widmer, (2006). Who are my family members? bridging and binding social capital in family configurations. *Journal of Personal and Social Relationships*, 23(6), 979-998.
- Widmer, (2010). *Family configurations: A structural approach to family diversity* (L. Ashgate, Ed.). London: .
- Widmer, , Favez, N., Aeby, G., De Carlo, I., & Doan, MT. (2012). *Capital social et coparentage dans les familles recomposees et de premiere union* (Tech. Rep.).
- Widmer, , Giudici, F., & Le Goff, P. A., JM. (2009). From support to control. a configurational perspective on conjugal quality. *Journal of Marriage and Family*.