ABSTRACT

POSTER PRESENTATION

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DEVELOPMENT OF CONJUGAL INTERACTION

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Families and couples develop different facets of the organisation and construction of their conjugal life. Each couple develops its own structures and attitudes over time. Several studies already dealt with typologies of couples to show different ways how relationships are constructed and organised (see: Allen & Olson, 2001; Asai & Olson, 2004; Cohen, Geron, & Farchi, 2010; Fowers & Olson, 1992; Givertz, Segrin, & Hanzal, 2009; Olson & Fowers, 1993; Schmahl & Walper, 2012). Nevertheless, there is still a lack of longitudinal studies of conjugal interaction and its development over time. Therefore this presentation will show how and why patterns of conjugal interaction changed over time. The typology for this project is based on the theoretical framework of conjugal interaction developed by Kellerhals and Widmer (Kellerhals, Widmer, & Levy, 2004; Widmer, Kellerhals, & Levy, 2003) who focused their work on two main dimensions. Cohesion, as the first dimension describes the mutual connection of partners of a couple towards each other, as well as the degree of desired contact with the social environment. Men and women are fusional if they emphasise community and solidarity in their relationship. Autonomous men and women prefer a high degree of autonomy from their partner. Furthermore, men and women can be open towards the social environment when they see contacts and social participation as an enrichment for their relationship. Closure, in contrast, describes men and women who clearly prefer to stay within the relationship and who see social contact as a threat for the internal dynamic. The second main dimension is regulation and it describes how roles, competencies and power are differentiated among each couple, and furthermore how flexible or rigid couples are. Based on data of 1534 couples living in Switzerland, five styles of conjugal interaction have already been identified, considering the indicators of the dimensions cohesion and regulation. Companionship couples prefer similar values and beliefs as well as social exchange. The role differentiation is quite low. Bastion couples are the most traditional ones among the sample with a high role differentiation. Furthermore, they are very fusional but also closed towards the social environment. Cocoon couples
show similarities to Bastion couples on the cohesion dimension, but role differentiation is lower. Associative couples are characterised by high autonomy and openness. The social life has a higher priority than the relationship, which is built around the social life. Parallel couples are autonomous but also closed. Partners of those couples do not interact with each other and neither with the social environment. Role differentiation is high among those couples (for further information see Widmer et al., 2003).

The aim of this presentation is twofold. Firstly, it will be examined how the single dimensions and indicators of conjugal interaction changed over time. Secondly, it will be examined whether the typology of conjugal interaction can be replicated using the same indicators for the same couples, but for two waves instead of for only one wave. It is hypothesised that once couples have implemented attitudes and structures, that there is a low chance to change. In other words, once a couple is affiliated to a certain style of conjugal interaction there is a high possibility to stay within this style. Significant life transitions are supposed to foster changes in the dimensions or the affiliation to a style of conjugal interaction.

Data for this project comes from the study “Social stratification, cohesion and conflict in contemporary families”, a three wave survey about couples living in Switzerland. The first wave was conducted in 1998 and 1534 couples participated. To be included in the sample, both partners had to participate. In 2004, the second wave took place, but only women participated. The third wave was conducted in 2011 with the aim to contact as many participants as possible who participated already in wave one. Finally, a sample of 721 couples who stayed with the same partner during the observation period, and for whom answers of both partners are available are included in the sample for this study. Most couples are in a relationship since 20 till 39 years. Most of them are married and have children, only eight percent are childless. About one third of men and women are already retired. Among those who are still active in the labour market, there are differences between men and women. Whereas men usually work full-time, many women only work part-time, which is a widely spread pattern in Switzerland.

The indicators of the single dimensions of the first and third wave are compared to each other in order to examine how stable they are over time. In general, there is a relatively high stability of cohesion and regulation over time. Interestingly, there are some gender differences in the cohesion dimension. There is a tendency for women to become more open over time, whereas men become more closed over time. Role differentiation becomes also lower for some couples over time, nevertheless, there is still a relatively high differentiation of roles. The indicator which shows the most significant changes is the master-status, which describes the domination of one specific life domain for men and women (either the labour market, or the household) (Krüger & Levy, 2001). Whereas there was a high affirmation of the master-status in wave one, many couples rejected it in wave three. Due to the transition to retirement, which was experienced by many couples in the sample, the focus on one specific life domain is no longer necessary. Routinisation, the preference to organise the daily conjugal and family life following strict rhythms, becomes higher over time. For the identification of the styles of conjugal interaction a cluster analysis, considering the indicators for both waves have been conducted. A six cluster solution was chosen, for which the five styles of conjugal interaction, already identified by Widmer et al. (Widmer et al., 2003) could have been recovered. Additionally, there is a sixth style, which is characterised by a transition on the cohesion dimension. These couples belonged to the Associative style in wave one, and were moving towards the Companionship style. Couples of this style became more fusional over time, without being as fusional as Companionship couples in the sample. The results show, that among the couples, who were childless in wave one, most of them who experienced the transition to parenthood belong to the transitional style.

The results obtained so far show that conjugal interaction stays relatively stable over time among couples who stayed together for a long period of time. During their common life course couples develop attitudes, structures and habits to construct their daily life together. Once they are implemented there is a low chance to change. Anyway, it could have been shown that life transition
foster changes. The transition to parenthood promote a more fusional attitude. The experience of this important life transition brings couples closer together. Already the decision to have a child is not compatible with an autonomous attitude of one of the partners. The transition the retirement leads to less importance of a gendered master-status. Men and women do not longer need to focus on only one specific life domain. The styles of conjugal interaction are also characterised by high stability. In fact, once a couple is affiliated to a certain style of conjugal interaction, there is a low chance to change. Actually, this confirms once again the stability of conjugal interaction what was already shown in the analyses of the single dimensions. Even though there exist several typologies of couples and families in the research literature this study shows an unique approach due to the consideration of dimensions in two points of time.

References


