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MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICTS BY COUPLES :  
A qualitative study of momentarily observed interaction modes  
and organization of familial activities.

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SUMMARY

Management of conflicts by couples — in cases of problem solving and decision making — has been the object of intensive studies.

In this paper an analysis of familial activities, obtained from interviews, is combined with the analysis of a non-artificially induced interaction of decision-making. The process that was observed concerned a problem that was highly relevant for a small sample of couples. They were observed while they simulated their future apartment at full-scale; the partners had to reach an agreement about a floor-plan that would then be used by architects to develop construction documents. The analysis suggests that momentarily observed interaction modes of couples, when related with categories of organization of familial activities, develop along lines sustained by specific domestic roles.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Eine Vielzahl von Studien hat sich mit Ehekonflikten und ihrer Lösung befasst. In diesem Artikel wird eine auf Interviews sich stützende Analyse von Familientätigkeiten in Beziehung gebracht mit der Analyse von Entscheidungsprozessen, die nicht künstlich induziert wurden.

Der Entscheidungsprozess betrifft ein Problem, das für ein kleines Sample von Paaren von grosser Tragweite war. Ihre Beobachtung fand statt während der Simulation ihrer zukünftigen Wohnung, wobei die wirklichen Entscheidungen über Einteilung und Ausgestaltung getroffen wurden. Die Analyse zeigt, dass sich die momentanen Interaktionsmodi zwischen Partnern — die mit den Organisationskategorien von Familientätigkeiten konfrontiert sind — entsprechend dem Schema ihrer spezifischen domestikalen Rolle entwickeln.

RESUME

Les études sur les conflits conjugaux et leur résolution abondent. Dans cet article, une analyse d'activités familiales, définies sur la base d'interviews, est conjointe à une analyse d'un processus non artificiellement induit de prise de décision.

Le processus qui a été observé concerne un problème qui, pour un petit échantillon de couples, revêtait une grande importance. Ils ont été observés pendant la simulation de leur futur appartement, celle-ci allant réellement déterminer l'agencement de leur logement. L'analyse suggère que des modes d'interaction momentanés de partenaires lorsque ceux-ci sont mis en relation avec des catégories d'organisation d'activités familiales, se développent selon le schéma de leur rôle domestique spécifique.

## 1. MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICTS BY COUPLES

Management of conflicts <sup>1</sup> by couples has been the object of intensive research (e.g. Bach and Wyde; 1969, Raush *et al.*; 1974, Sprey, 1974).

Sprey (1969, 1979) relates family cooperation to conflict management and defines it borrowing Horowitz' (1967, 278) terminology as a process concerning "the settlement of problems in terms which make possible the continuation of differences and even fundamental disagreements". Thus Sprey suggests that family harmony ought to be considered as problematic rather than a normal state of affairs.

A conflict framework does not focus on the properties of differences *per se* but on the ability of the family members to deal with them. As an important consequence conflict management becomes tied to specific situations: "all possible areas of difference or agreement thus become properties of a situation to be contrasted, and are theoretically relevant only to the extent that they influence the process of cooperation" (Sprey, 1969, 704).

An example of a study that shows, in spite of familial disharmony and disorganization, how family stability is still maintained is the well-known account of Lewis (1967) on the life of a Puerto-Rican community; this study deserves mention here because it is a "clinical" and "participant" investigation in contrast with most family research which resorts to census or questionnaire data or, alternatively, to simulated conflicts under experimental control.

In studies using the questionnaire approach (e.g. Cutler and Dyer, 1965; Navaran, 1967; Petersen, 1968) couples are asked to rate their usual initial reaction to behaviour that contradicts with their expectations and then to imagine the partner's response. Whereas an advantage of this approach is to be concerned with the couples' own perceptions of occurring behaviour, an evident limitation is the assumption that the behaviours described in the questionnaire as well as the subsequent responses correspond to a frame of reference that the sample population shares.

"Pleasant discussion" will be one objective category for the analysis but as it is content-bound it may cover very different behaviours of respondents. This becomes particularly disturbing when reported behavioural styles are correlated with situational or individual difference variables. Another limitation of the approach is that respondents must resort to a recalling of past experiences of conflict management which are subject to variable distortions. The above themes are further discussed by Glick and Gross (1975).

In studies of conflict management using the observational approach in a laboratory setting, this latter shortcoming is overcome, but the researcher is confronted with other major problems; for instance, the *choice* of an adequate interaction stimulus and the *measurement* of the occurring interaction.

1 The term refers to the family as "a system of conflict management". In the literature that is discussed in this paragraph we include under the heading "conflict management" work of authors concerned with decision making and problem solving related to marital communication. Thus, we sympathize with the "conflict framework" advocated by Sprey (1969).

Diverse studies support the use of only short sequences of observed interaction as data sources; for example, Huntington (1958) notes that the same sequences of interaction occur over and over again between partners, whereas Watzlawick *et al.* (1967) suggest that there is an "obligation" within the family conceived as a system of communication — as well as within other stable communication structures — to repeat over and over again the same sequences of verbal exchange.

However the procedures used to elicit behaviours may still artificially constrain responses or alter the partners' predispositions. If, for instance, the aim is to reach an agreement or to solve a problem, a very important aspect of reciprocal involvement is the extent to which the couple perceives the stake of the discussion. Here it should be noted that most observational studies of interaction have taken place in the psychiatric settings involving people considered as mentally ill (e. g. Bateson *et al.*, 1956, 1963; Haley, 1964).

Acknowledging this work — where a clinical diagnosis is the essential aim — several authors have investigated marital communication in the everyday life of couples using "clinical" interactional stimuli such as TAT or Rorschach cards (e. g. Huntington, 1958; Winter and Ferreira, 1967). However, whereas in the case of psychiatric diagnosis the stake is perceived as important by all the persons in presence, it is not evident that in an *ad hoc* included conflict partners will both perceive it as such and thus express their own way of coping with a conflictual situation. Such problems are also inherent in the use of other interactional stimuli that have been devised including questionnaires that are discussed between the partners (Stroodtbeck, 1951; Olson and Ryder, 1970; Weiss *et al.* 1973) or structured games (Straus, 1968; Murphy and Mendelson, 1973; Kolb and Straus, 1974).

Rausch *et al.* (1974) used a "naturalistic" laboratory setting — for instance a living-room with a TV set — and had partners to simulate a debate about the choice of a television program when their preferences were not corresponding. In all these cases it is apparent that the subjects' own perception of the global situation and "living into it" becomes central.

This is particularly the case as the conflict is to develop along implicitly predetermined lines, yet the partners' implication cannot be assessed except for doubtful evidence provided by answers to a direct question on the matter or by the researchers' evaluation.

As to the method of rating observed interaction predetermined scales are commonly used (e.g. elaborations on Bales, 1950; Terrill and Terrill, 1965; Murphy and Mendelson, 1973). Judges are initially trained to evaluate, then rate, and the interrater correlation will be assessed. The more detailed the analysis, the less assurances these ratings provide. Furthermore, the more difficult the rating is to assess the more distant it will be from categories that the users would actually consider as relevant. This point should be kept in mind if research on marital communication is specifically aimed at testing a conflict framework. In this respect, an obvious alternative is to limit the rating categories, although this would also — in all of the above reported studies — limit considerably their heuristic value.



In spite of the above mentioned limitations, quantitative research on marital communication and specifically conflict management continues much along the same lines. No alternative seems available. Glick and Gross (1975, 511) sum up their review article on this topic with the following proposition: "It is suggested that future research utilize an approach which permits couples to discuss conflict issues which are personally relevant and which require minimal guidance from the experimenter as to how the conflict should be handled." This suggestion could be followed at least by qualitative research.

The evidence that will be discussed in this paper is of a qualitative kind where couples debate issues that are personally of much relevance for them. They relate to partners' conflicts about the lay-out of their future dwelling. Furthermore, the experimenter acts only as an observer with no direct interference in the conflict itself. The couples decide by themselves about the dwelling plan by modifying, adding or moving away the walls in a full-scale space simulator. The architect records the resulting lay-out and this is intended as the plan to be built in reality. Thus, partners are left to themselves and no interaction with them is intentionally sought by the experimenter. Such a context avoids the above-mentioned methodological limitations in a study of conflict management, because the research is based on observational data, conflictual issues are highly relevant for the subjects, and the rating procedure is simply reduced to a commentary on excerpts from the observed dialogues.

Nonetheless, the present study although very limited, raises other methodological and contextual problems that will be discussed in a later section of the paper.

## 2. AIM OF PRESENT STUDY

Independently of methodological limitations of existing studies, one theoretical problem related to research on conflict management by couples warrants further attention here. In fact, how is conflict management to be related to more general characteristics of a couple's domestic life <sup>2</sup> such as their organization of familial activities ?

In this study, the above question will be addressed from a specific point of view. Given that observational data provide us with a possibility of describing a couple as it actually interacts, it seems important to understand how such a description is to be articulated with respect to more comprehensive data about the same couple ; in other terms, how is conflict management related to a family's current domestic life. This question begs an answer if we are to assess more closely how family stability is related to conflict management.

- 2 We limit the study to domestic life issues as the conflict management of couples was related to this topic (the lay-out of their future apartment). Problems inherent to this choice are discussed in the last section of the paper.

### 3. SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

The study is a qualitative analysis of data obtained from a population that independently from this research, is taking part in a housing project.

The cases to be discussed are from an overall sample of fifteen couples. In a medium density residential development each family has planned its own dwelling unit.

The architects responsible for this project discuss a tentative plan with the future residents. The strength of the suggestions made by the architects during the ensuing meetings depend on the ideas of the future dwellers. The same can be said about the time spent on elaborating the plan. Thus, the resulting plan is the outcome of a joint effort between the residents and designers, although it still remains a rather abstract product for the families. The architects propose to the families the possibility of "testing" their future dwelling at full-scale in a simulator. This will add little cost for the family, but it will demand from the participants a continual presence in the simulator during three days. The families who accepted this possibility allocated their time to simulate their future dwelling in order to "really see what it would look like". They were free to modify their plan in order to make it fit their preferences according to their emerging view points. The families who decided to use the simulator were usually doubtful about some aspects of their future house. They knew that their future dwelling would be built according to the plan that resulted from their effort in the simulator: hence the time spent was extremely important in order to find the best possible solution. Thus eventual problems were really at stake and so were the conflicts between the partners.

During the simulation process an architect was always present to answer questions by the residents, as well as eventually propose solutions when residents asked for advice. Usually some friends or relatives of the residents were also present and expressed their opinions. The use of the simulator was a rather complex event where talks took place continuously while simulating, while resting, while eating: often a problem would find a solution after multiple deliberations.

During these three days the task for the researcher was to make notes and record all observable events related to the interaction between the partners of a couple. The data were then processed and the couples were classified according to their apparent mode of interaction, in terms of positions respectively occupied by the partners.

Independently of this analysis — interviews — using an open-ended questionnaire — were conducted in the families' homes. Informal interview data were also collected during the simulation itself, especially at the time of breaks. Each partner was interviewed about his or her individual past and the couple was jointly asked about their residential history. Interview data about daily activities that could be identified on this basis were then compared between couples and families were subdivided into three main categories.

The two sets of data were then compared. In this respect we will limit ourselves to an illustration of the study and a brief discussion of its primary implication. Yet, the presentation will be lengthy. This is a critique often leveled at qualitative studies (e.g. Becker, 1964), that we must accept.

#### 4. THREE FAMILIES AND THE ORGANIZATION OF FAMILIAL ACTIVITIES

The three couples discussed in this paper are representative of *three categories of organization of familial activities*. These three descriptive categories are borrowed from Bott's (1955, 1957, 1971) study on conjugal roles and social networks. In an appendix to her study Bott discusses how she developed her typology of organization of familial activities into *joint*, *complementary* and *independent*. These grew from the analysis of the extensive interview data Bott gathered from a sample of twenty families. After several attempts, she retained the word *joint* for a large category cutting across previously established ones:

"Certain types of organization were usually found in close association, and the couples themselves seemed to think of them as a single type of behaviour. All activities carried out by husband and wife in each other's presence were felt to be similar in kind regardless of whether the activities were complementary (. .), independent (. .), or shared (. .). It was not even necessary that husband and wife should actually be together. As long as they were both at home it was felt that their activities partook of some special, shared, family quality" (Bott, 1971, 240). As pointed out by Bott this classification is not merely based on the form of the activity but also considers what the couple thinks and feels about it.

The other categories are *complementary* organization where "the activities of husband and wife are different and separate but fitted to form a whole" (Bott, 1971, 53) and *independent* organization where "activities are carried out separately by husband and wife without reference to each other, in so far as this is possible" (*id.*, 53).

Thus, ascertaining in what particular category one family can be classed is a matter of general evaluation by the researcher and no strict criteria can be given for his procedure. However, necessary prerequisites might be defined as:

- a thorough knowledge of the family's domestic activities.

In our case this consisted of interviews with both partners.

Interviews in the families' homes were focused on the families' residential history, which is the major theme of the larger research project (of which this study is but one part). These data provide substantial evidence for assessing the daily life course of each couple. Supplementary and standardized questionnaire data explored the same themes.

- the researcher's capacity to feel the dynamics of a couple.

The researchers had the opportunity to meet all respondents in their current dwelling, on the site of the future dwelling, and during the three-day simulation in the laboratory. Opinions about the organization of family activities grounded on this personal contact were confronted with interview and questionnaire data.

Although, as Bott (1971, 53) stresses, the three categories are only points along a continuum and that all three types of organization are found in all families

the relative amount of each type varies from one family to another, and thus it is possible to situate the couples in general terms with respect to them <sup>3</sup>.

It should also be noted that the dominant pattern might be assumed to be rather slow and thus irrelevant for our purpose. The three families chosen to illustrate this paper will now be situated with respect to the above categories. The three families are of the same age-group, socio-culturally comparable, from the same area with the husbands leading independent activities responsible for smaller business activities initiated by themselves. The project is a means for them to acquire privately owned homes. Mr. Apple is away from the home all day and leaves the household and two children to his wife. The organization of familial activities can here be considered predominantly complementary. In fact Mr. and Mrs. Apple believe in a clear-out division of labour between them, where the husband only exceptionally does any of the housework. Although children were considered the responsibility of both partners, he would only participate in playing with them occasionally. Yet, the husband feels responsible for entertaining guests, he "offers" his wife a nice home-environment, and he desired to spend his professional life in the immediate proximity of his family (this was given as an important reason for changing house). He makes most decisions concerning their common life, but she decides alone about cooking, is responsible for the children and for keeping the "house very clean".

Mr. and Mrs. Cherry both work full-time outside the home. Mrs. Cherry takes care of the household alone, Mr. Cherry helps with repairing technical matters. Mrs. Cherry does not enjoy cooking, so the couple often eats outside the home. They have no children. This couple might be classified as predominantly independent since "activities are carried out separately by husband and wife without reference to each other, in so far as this is possible". (Bott, 1971, 53). Currently, Mr. and Mrs. Cherry spend time together only for specific leisure purposes (sports, being with friends) although they share the same apartment, on which neither of them is keen although it is admittedly practical. Their professional interests are distant, and even at home Mr. Cherry will continue working at his desk. Important decisions are made together: in the case of the housing project, the decision to buy a new home was taken quickly ("we are like that, we decide very suddenly").

Mr. Berry is away all day and Mrs. Berry is in charge of the household and the two children. Moreover, she takes care of some of her husband's book-keeping. He shares the domestic tasks when he is at home. This couple might be considered as having a joint organization of familial activities where these are carried out by either partner. In fact, although the division of domestic tasks is quite clear, the couple has the feeling of sharing most of them. Admittedly Mr. Berry's professional life invades the home also but Mrs. Berry has become actively engaged in

3 Bolt (1957, 1971) actually makes use of only a twofold division of organization of familial activities: on the one hand, complementary and independent types of organization associated with a segregated conjugal role-relationship and, on the other hand, a predominantly joint organization associated with a joint conjugal role-relationship.



it and feels it as her "job". On the weekends they manage to exclude the "professional world" completely and enjoy family life and friends. Both are particularly keen on all sorts of indoor leisure activities.

As stressed by Bott this classification — here inferred from in-depth interviews — is concerned with the pre-dominant organization type of a family and does not exclude the presence of the other types at certain times.

## 5. OVERT INTERACTION WITHIN FAMILIES

For the classification of the overt interaction of the couples as recorded during the simulation of their future dwelling, categories proposed by Watzlawick, Helmick Beavin and Jackson (1967) were used. These authors propose a distinction between symmetrical and complementary modes of interaction within couples with respect to conflict management.

A symmetrical mode is based on the equality of the partners i.e. one tends to take positions that mirror those of the partner. For instance, during a conflict, the partners will try to reverse the arguments that are used against themselves so that they become arguments against the other. Differences in the positions that are taken are reduced, being more a question of nuances. A degeneration in this type of relationship will take the form of an escalation of the debate between the partners.

A complementary mode is based on the difference of partners and in this case one of them will adopt a superior position, being more active about decisions, while the other will have an inferior position implying a more passive attitude. Thus, during a conflict, the partner in the superior position will try to impose his point of view by his authority while the role of the other is to choose his way of submission. In this case rigidity will be the consequence of a degenerating interaction.

The above classification is not based on the content of the argument but on the relationship between partners and, of necessity, requires a sequence of answers <sup>4</sup>.

If symmetrical and complementary interaction modes are polar opposites then the three couples that will be discussed can be situated along a continuum according to their predominantly observed mode of exchange. All the families of the sample fall into one of the categories that are presented here.

The procedure for determining the mode of interaction is similar to the one used by Watzlawick et al. (1967), in their clinical investigations, i.e. a commentary on excerpts of recorded verbal exchange between partners. In order that the comment is convincing, relatively large excerpts from protocols are required.

4 Within this communication framework Watzlawick et al. (1967) suggest that a versatile alteration of complementary and symmetric exchanges is to be considered as the most "stable" and "normal" relationship.

It should be noted that couples are thus defined as they overtly appear to interact and no relation is sought with the reasons they have for interacting in that particular manner.

To extend our view of the family unit beyond momentary interaction this analysis will be combined with the previously discussed data on the organization of familial activities, in the final section of the paper.

In the following sections the three couples are presented as they overtly interacted during the observational phase of the study. The excerpts from the recorded exchanges between partners were collected during the simulation of their future dwelling. Since the simulated constructions are in full-scale the partners are inside the mock-ups while talking to each other.

## 6. APPLE KITCHEN

The plan that is simulated has been prepared by Mr. Apple alone before coming to the simulator. The problem at stake is the relationship between the kitchen and the living area. Mr. Apple wants an "open" kitchen in direct contact with the living area, whereas Mrs. Apple wants a separated room for cooking and eating.

- (1) Mrs. Apple : "With an open kitchen it will smell all over".
- (2) Mr. Apple : "No, because there will be the window and the air-exhauster. And where we live now we have an open kitchen".
- (3) Mrs. Apple : "No, because I always close the door when I cook".
- (4) Architect : "Would you like a closed kitchen ?"
- (5) Mr. Apple : "No"
- (6) Mrs. Apple : "No"
- (7) Architect : "I ask, because . . ."
- (8) Mrs. Apple : "No, no, I won't change anything, I would like, but, in . . . a . . ."
- (9) Mr. Apple : "No, because then there shouldn't be an air-exhauster . . . and we souldn't put the window ah ah . . ."  
"You've got the exhauster and the windows, why do you want to close, close everything with doors and walls ?"
- (10) Mrs. Apple : "No, I don't want to close it, no no . . . I said we shall leave it like that, in any case it will not change anymore . . .".

Mr. and Mrs. Apple offer the example of a complementary interaction. Mr. Apple (superior position) proposes and decides and Mrs. Apple expresses an opinion, but has no guarantee of being heard. Her defense is to become very rigid about her submissive position.



The above excerpt illustrates this interaction pattern. Mr. Apple imposes his point of view without entering an open discussion (6, 9) and Mrs. Apple expresses her opinion only quite hesitatingly, withdrawing herself immediately afterwards (8). Mr. Apple's reluctance to conceive the situation from the point of view of his wife (9) is emphatic.

- (11) Mr. Apple : "This is enough – *I* cook in my little corner, there is but *me* . . ."
- (12) Mrs. Apple : "But, I don't like if there are people and they stare at me in *my* kitchen".
- (13) Mr. Apple : "People who come to visit us, are people we appreciate, that appreciate us, and that is it, so if they come it is to talk . . ."

Mr. Apple is making an ironic comment on his wife's philosophy of the kitchen (11) that she finds the courage to counter and clearly state her position (12).

With his intervention Mr. Apple is taking possession also of his wife's point of view (11) thus excluding her totally. A realization of this sort can be considered to cause Mrs. Apple's reaction. Within the couple's interactive mode she must have her position – be it inferior – so when her husband is apparently completely putting her aside she claims her reintegration (12) ("*my* kitchen").

Mrs. Apple's point of view finds a clear expression (the visual isolation of the kitchen) only with respect to the degeneration of the debate, while her husband begins to "play against the rules" by excluding his wife from the interaction.

The search will continue and two smaller walls will be added to the original plan in order to cut the visual contact between the kitchen and the living area. This occurrence supports Mrs. Apple's desire for spatial separation without separating in a too obvious manner the two areas. Neither of the partners seems really satisfied but Mr. Apple in particular interprets the walls as "useless".

A concluding excerpt from the debate confirms the difficulties:

- (14) Mrs. Apple : "But, Tom, if I can't have *my* kitchen as I want it, well, then I wan't go on . . ."
- (15) Mr. Apple : "Your kitchen is as you have it . . . there".
- (16) Mrs. Apple : "But that is like you want it."
- (17) Mr. Apple : "Why do you want to have walls ? Explain to me!"
- (18) Mrs. Apple : "I don't want walls, but I don't want it so that someone is looking . . . we don't change anything anymore, we leave it like that".
- (19) Mr. Apple : "But why don't you want it ?"
- (20) Mrs. Apple : "Because".
- (21) Mrs. Apple : "If I am there, does it disturb you if I watch you

- while you work ?”
- (22) Mrs. Apple :        ”No”.
- (23) Mr. Apple :         ”Tell me what wall ? ”
- (24) Mrs. Apple :        ”There is none”.
- (25) Mr. Apple :         ”Tell me so that you will realize your mistake”.

Mrs. Apple is asking for the respect of the rules of the game otherwise she will not continue (14) implying that her husband is abusing his superior position within the interaction pattern. But, characteristically, immediately afterwards she withdraws and this might well illustrate what we have termed rigidity in the case of a degenerating debate. Correspondingly, Mr. Apple remains impervious to his wife's arguments and when he eventually wants to take a step in her direction (23) it is just to make her "realize her mistake" (25). The design will not be changed anymore.

## 7. CHERRY KITCHEN

The problem at hand is the spatial relations within the kitchen and between the kitchen and dining area.

With a friend of his Mr. Cherry has just positioned what he considers a working surface of the kitchen.

- (1) Mrs. Cherry :        ”Is it for working on ?”
- (2) Friend :             ”Yes”.
- (3) Mrs. Cherry :        ”A gadget to work on . . .”
- (4) Mr. Cherry :         ”But, then, what you could do . . . it's nice to work on,  
but people are there on the other side . . . when the  
people . . . you cut your onion, your beef,  
your stuff . . .”
- (5) Mrs. Cherry :        ”So what . . . , I talk with the people instead of  
being hidden . . .”
- (6) Mr. Cherry :         ”But it stinks all over the place . . .”.
- ”There one could put a wall, close the kitchen, and  
just leave an opening, in the wall and close the rest,  
with all the stuff inside . . .”
- (7) Mrs. Cherry :        ”And then what . . .”
- (8) Mr. Cherry :         ”Well, you'll have space . . .”

Mr. and Mrs. Cherry are considered an intermediary case with however a predominant connotation of a symmetrical mode. The initiative comes regularly from Mr. Cherry, but a thorough discussion will always follow with a shared search for a solution, the debate including mirrored arguments.

In the episode, Mr. Cherry proposes a first "open" solution which he himself

discards. The proposition comes from his side, but Mrs. Cherry seizes the occasion to express her favourable opinion about an open relation between the kitchen and dining area. This can be considered as an example of a mirror debate, where Mrs. Cherry reverses the argument of her husband, showing its positive implication for a contract between the two zones, where Mr. Cherry was using it as evidence against such a relation.

- (9) Mrs. Cherry : (inside the kitchen): "It is not very large!"  
(10) Mr. Cherry : "The wall is there, because we must leave the beam outside the kitchen (just on the other side of the wall)".  
(11) Architect : "For the construction it's better if the beam is outside, but it should be tested to see whether this makes the kitchen too small . . ."  
(12) Mr. Cherry : "You don't think it's big enough ?"  
(13) Mrs. Cherry : "It's for turning around . . . for one person it's all right . . ., but for two ?"  
"It's like a corridor".  
(14) Mr. Cherry : "Aha . . ."  
(15) Architect : "For two it's no good".  
(16) Mrs. Cherry : (to Mr. Cherry): "Would you help me in the kitchen ?"  
(17) At this point the wall's position is changed and it is put on the other side of the beam, and this seems a more satisfying solution to Mrs. Cherry, and the architect and Mr. Cherry agree that this gives the kitchen "more character".

Initially, it is Mrs. Cherry who is going to use the kitchen. The criterion adopted by her in deciding about the kitchen's good fit is one of functionality. In this excerpt the interaction mode is complementary: Mr. Cherry accepts the modification proposed by Mrs. Cherry without further debate. He agrees with the priority of a functional criterion. However, he also finds a reason of another type – aesthetic – that confirms this choice (17). Thus, arguments are mutually accepted and this restores a certain symmetry.

- (18) Mrs. Cherry : "To hide it, it would be better to have a door".  
(19) Mr. Cherry : "It wouldn't hide anything because on the side with the opening you can see through".  
(20) Mrs. Cherry : "But it's a separation in any case, and the corridor seems larger because there, at the end, you close".

Mrs. Cherry considers the kitchen from the point of view of what she will be doing there, and particularly the possibility of leaving dirty dishes behind her without being reminded about them.

The positions of the couple are almost reversed (compare with 1–8).

Mr. Cherry shows a reluctance to the idea of a door. This seems to contradict the preceeding episode where Mr. Cherry wanted to isolate the "smelling activities" from the dining area.

This exchange might be taken as an example of the importance of the couple's interaction mode even in a case where the disagreement about the problem is actually fading away. Both partners have similar arguments that become interchangeable, but are still used to contrast or complement each other while guiding the planning process itself.

## 8. BERRY CONNECTION

For Mr. and Mrs. Berry one of the reasons for coming to the simulator is to test the relationship between the living area, the children's rooms and the entrance that are all interrelated in their future dwelling.

A problem occurred when the couple realized that a wall, which they had introduced in their house plan to separate the living room from the doors of the children's rooms, had been suppressed by the architect. The architect had redrawn the plan in scale for the simulator and had decided without further consideration that "in order to have a larger living room" the wall should be suppressed.

The dwelling is built in the simulator according to the proposition of the architect. The problem for Mr. and Mrs. Berry is to find a way of eliminating the inconveniences that had initially induced them to introduce the wall.

- (1) Mr. Berry : "You want to have the door there ?" (hidden for the living room)
- (2) Mrs. Berry : "Yeah, and you say where ?"
- (3) Mr. Berry : "Here". (opening on the living room)
- (4) Mrs. Berry : "But, these two doors opening on the living room, it's really not nice . . . that one might, because it's there and you don't see it (partially covered by its position), but the other".  
"You see it directly, you sit in the living room and you fall on the door, I can't stand it".
- (5) Mr. Berry : "But if the door is there — as in (1) — you see the same thing".
- (6) Mrs. Berry : "Not at all".

Mr. and Mrs. Berry show a symmetrical interaction. Both partners affirm themselves and divergences in their positions will bring forth an escalation of the debate where reciprocal arguments will be used to contrast each others positions.

Both partners will express their opinions and then the debate might move on. Arguments might be used to counter (5) what they were actually invoked for (4). The episode illustrates their respective positions about the problem :

Mr. Berry does not want to change anything whereas his wife wants to displace one of the doors so that the visual relationship will change.

- (7) Mrs. Berry : "I think that the door should go there — as in (3) — . . .  
I mean, we can put the piano in between the doors".
- (8) Mr. Berry : "I don't see the piano there, it's a corridor for circulation".
- (9) Mrs. Berry : "Then, where would you put the piano . . . no that's  
exactly what I don't want, a corridor, the living room is  
already quite small".
- (10) Mr. Berry : "But you have to make it a corridor because you've got  
the kid's room, and there the bathroom, to get to the  
bathroom a child must circulate . . .".
- (11) Mrs. Berry : "But he can walk around the piano, when it's there".
- (12) Mr. Berry : "I don't know . . . it's not functional, can't you have  
your piano elsewhere ?"

Both approaches are partial but are taken into consideration by the partner. This opens the way for the search of a compromise or synthesis — in the sense of integrating and bypassing both conceptions. Both partners realize that the question is to reconcile two partial points of view, the success depending on a mutual integration.

- (13) Mr. Berry : "What if we studied the possibility of putting the piano  
there as a "wall" hiding the doors from the living area  
so that it would separate the run from the rooms . . ."
- (14) Mrs. Berry : "It's no good . . . then the wall is too short . . ."  
one should continue the wall,,.
- (15) Mr. Berry : "But I mean without a wall, just the piano . . ."
- (16) Mrs. Berry : "But it's just the same, it crushes the entrance . . ."  
— Later :
- (17) Mr. Berry : "I don't know. I think that door goes there — as in (3).
- (18) Mrs. Berry : "But no, it's right into the living room . . .  
if you put it there, then there must be a wall . . ."  
Later :
- (19) Mr. Berry : "I think that it would be good if the door was here"  
— as in (3).
- (20) Mrs. Berry : "Then we have to close a little bit". (with the wall).
- (21) Mr. Berry : "Right, eventually close a little bit here, with a book-case,  
not too high". — like the piano in (13).
- (22) Mrs. Berry : "Or, then a wall . . . since it has to cover the doors . . .  
a wall: a short wall."
- (23) Mr. Berry : "Eventually . . . let us see how it looks".
- (24) Mrs. Berry : "Not only half-height".
- (25) Mr. Berry : "Then you close it, you devote this corner to the doors,  
and it's over, stop."

The solution to the problem at hand is gradually found after a phase of escalation in the debate. Practically it will amount to the reintroduction of the wall that they had originally planned, but subsequently was suppressed by the architect.

Mr. Berry does not accept the piano between the two doors, because it would interfere with circulation. The displacement he proposes (13) — drawing back the piano a little bit — is a first proposition of a "light" wall that would partially hide the doors. This proposition clearly reflects a desire to maintain the wishes of the two partners: the piano is kept in its position, only slightly drawn back, avoiding interference with the corridor. However, the proposal is negatively received by Mrs. Berry (16), who retains the idea of a wall, as it becomes evident soon after (18). She concedes to the proposal of a "short wall" (22) and the sense of this solution — what will be finally retained — is well summed up by her husband (25): the problem of hiding the doors is settled in "the corner", with a little wall "it's over".

Both of the partners could have done without the wall from their single perspectives, but given the desire to integrate the other's viewpoint the proposal of the wall imposes itself and is affirmatively accepted by both (22) (25).

## 9. DISCUSSION

In the three examples that we have presented, the excerpts of dialogues between the partners of each couple illustrate the interaction modes of these couples in the elaboration of their dwelling plans.

The procedure that has been adopted for the ordering of the interaction modes resorts to comments about excerpts; the above are representative of the verbal exchanges that occurred within these couples. Thus the couples are ordered on a continuum according to their prevalent mode of interaction.

When this ordering is combined with the preceding classification of the couples' familial activities some more general considerations about the families' conflict management might be formulated by reference to *domestic roles*. This term covers for our purpose the position occupied during verbal exchange *and* the subdivision of familial activities. We address here the concept of role in a very specific sense; it should neither be confused with the "amorphous" term of *sex role* (e.g. Scanzoni and Fox, 1980) nor the more commonly accepted *family role* comprising the division of household tasks, of child care *and of paid employment* (e.g. Ericksen et al., 1979).

The Apple's illustrate a complementary interaction mode. In the process examined, herein, the search for a satisfactory solution is inhibited by the rigidity of the respective positions.

This is obviously not a necessary feature of the mode of interaction and, yet, even this extreme outcome does not prevent the couple from making a decision — be it primarily on Mr. Apple's terms.



The organization of familial activities in this couple has been classified as predominantly complementary : activities are different and separate, yet complete each other.

Thus, in this case there seems to be a general coherence within the partners' respective *domestic roles*.

Like in conflict management so in the distribution of familial activities there is a relatively clear pattern where competences are assigned so that they do not interfere fundamentally. When, as Spiegel (1960, 364) has noted, husbands and wives share role preferences "the person is spared the necessity of coming to decisions about most of the acts he performs, because he knows his part so well".

When, as in the above example about the planning of the lay-out of the future dwelling, a conflict arises and has to be managed, although the divergences are real and are acknowledged, they can be referred to the distribution of competences. Rigidity is an extreme point of the interaction that paradoxically settles the question by letting it fall back on the domestic role division :

Mr. Apple decides.

The Cherry's offer an example where complementary and symmetric interaction modes co-exist. The search for the solution of the conflict implies the exploration of different points of view that are almost interchangeable with respect to who adopts them.

The organization of familial activities in this couple has been considered as predominantly independent : husband and wife act mostly without reference to each other.

In this case, *domestic roles* — conjunction of interaction mode and familial activities — are also clearly expressed : as in the case of the Apple's they don't interfere fundamentally, yet in the case of conflict management this leads to a different outcome. There is no possibility of falling back on the role division as this cannot settle a problem. In this case, the search for a solution must be explored until both partners *find a reason* for accepting a particular one.

Finally, the Berrys' have been classified as a couple where the interaction mode is usually symmetrical. In the above excerpt, after a phase of escalation, the couple gradually moves toward a solution for their conflict by integrating each others' viewpoint.

Familial activities in this couple are organized predominantly in a joint fashion where most tasks are shared or felt to be shared.

In this case, *domestic roles* show a particular pattern where competences are not strictly defined but experienced as common to a large extent. Thus, as with the Cherry's, in the case of conflict management the search for a solution must be extensively explored, although with the Berrys' the endpoint is reached when both viewpoints are integrated.

With these elements in mind the main implication of the study might be stressed.

A conflict framework for the study of marital communication focuses on the ability of family members to deal with differences. Symmetrical and complemen-

tary interaction are two categories for labelling a sequence of verbal exchange between partners. If analysis of data is restricted to such sequence excerpts it also incurs one major risk: the labels of symmetrical and complementary communication modes are extended to the general relation of a couple. Thus, Watzlawick *et al.* (1967) consider purely complementary and purely symmetrical relations as pathologically symptomatic.

A conflict framework implicitly purports such generalizations but assumes also that conflict management is, and — especially — differences between partners are, a normal state of affairs within couples.

As this study shows, *it is by situating occurring conflicts within a wider conception of the organization of familial activities, that a classification of overt interaction attains a perspective which makes observed outcomes . “normally” acceptable even if they show extreme forms.*

Several methodological limitations of studies of conflict management by couples that were discussed in the introduction to this paper are overcome in the present study.

However at this point the main limitations of the present study must also be mentioned.

The results might be taken as relevant with respect to actual conflict management. Yet, as a whole more questions are raised than solved, among these, for example, the representativity of the sample. Most of such problems are general issues of qualitative research and will not be discussed further.

However one further limitation of content is necessary. Families — as they have been described here — are typically considered as isolated units, within the domestic walls, or as Jackson (1957) formulates it “homeostatic” units. In contrast to this approach it is conventional today to view the family as a unit with a set of requirements both inside and outside the home (e.g. Ericksen *et al.*, 1979; Young and Willmott, 1973; Pleck, 1977) instead of considering only the division of household tasks as in earlier research.

In other words, family activities must encompass not only the division of domestic tasks *per se* but look at them within a broader frame. The homeostasis of a family is, as Watzlawick *et al.* (1967) put it, an open ended system.

Without entailing a fundamental change of the approach adopted herein, this critique suggests further analysis of domestic activities as these relate to actual conflict management. Within a larger social framework <sup>5</sup>.

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