Unpacking the Concept of Negotiation in Research on Couples and Families

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Abstract

That couples negotiate has been a central assumption in research on couples and families during the last few decades. In this article we take a closer look at the basic assumptions on which the understanding of negotiation rests and the way the concept of negotiation has been applied. First, we argue that negotiation is rare in couples' everyday lives and that much of what has been discussed in terms of negotiation can be understood in terms of 'doing gender' and 'doing couple' within the context of couples' everyday lives. We suggest that there exists little need and space for negotiation in couples' everyday lives. Second, we unpack the concept of negotiation and find that it is characterized by ambiguity and a lack of clarity. Finally, we conclude with a suggestion for a more clear definition in order to differentiate negotiation from other forms of interaction that takes place within couples.

Key Words: Negotiation, couples, doing gender, doing couple, family sociology, pure relationship, everyday life, conceptual stretching

1. Introduction

Negotiation has been seen as a key concept for understanding how modern couples organize their life together within different areas of family life. This emphasis on negotiation has been accompanied by a notion that intimate relationships within family and couple relationships has been transformed. Giddens for instance depicts modern couple relationships as moving towards the 'pure relationship' where couple relationships are characterized by greater democracy and gender equality (Giddens 1991). The concept of negotiation reflects a rejection of families as characterized by consensus and complementary gender roles and underlines the freedom of choice available in couple relationships (Björnberg & Kollind 2003; Finch 1989; Finch & Mason 1993; Roman 2004).

In this article we take a closer look at negotiation within couples. More precisely, we look at the basic assumptions on which the understanding of negotiation rests and the way the concept of negotiation has been applied in social research. Based on the findings from our earlier research on couple relationships (Author & Author 2009; Author & Author 2005), we suggest that negotiation is rare in couples' everyday lives. In light of this, we would like to open up for a discussion about the role of negotiation in couple relationships. Our contribution to this discussion is twofold. First, we will suggest that there exists little need and space for negotiation in couples' everyday lives. Second, we unpack the concept of negotiation and find that it is characterized by ambiguity and a lack of clarity.

2. The link between the transformation of intimacy and negotiation

A basic assumption in much sociological theorizing on families and couples is the relationship between the movement towards more democratic and gender equal intimate relationships, and the increased importance of negotiation. Freed from traditional gendered norms, responsibilities and obligations, couples are assumed to need to reflect over their relationships and make active choices regarding how they want to live their lives (Bauman 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Castells 1997; Giddens 1991, 1992). Families have gone from being seen as duty oriented to being 'families of negotiation'. Under late modernity, couple relationships are seen as more open and freed from rules and traditional norms. An underlying assumption often associated with the use of negotiation is that couples and families *need* to negotiate in order to make their everyday lives work**.** Negotiation in couple relationships has often been seen as rational, intentional and necessary for the organization of everyday life (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Björnberg & Kollind 2003; Giddens 1992).

However, this shift towards 'families of negotiation' seems to build on certain premises. Below, we will take a closer look at three of these premises.

First, the notion that modern couples negotiate builds on the assumption that traditional gendered patterns of inequality have been weakened thereby creating a greater need and space for couples to negotiate. Freed from bonds of tradition and duty, negotiation becomes necessary in order to navigate through the multitude of possible ways of organizing their relationships. However, research shows that inequality and traditional views and ways of organizing couple relationships still persist (Author & Author 2009). A large number of studies have documented asymmetrical power relations between women and men in couple relationships, and inequalities regarding control over and the sharing of money, time, housework and care responsibilities for children and kin, as well as for emotional work in couple relationships (Ahrne & Roman 1997; Brannen & Moss 1991; Duncombe & Marsden 1993; Author 1999, 2002; Pahl 1989; Roman 1999).

Second, central to the idea that couples negotiate is the assumption that couple relationships are becoming more "pure" in the sense that the they are less permeated and affected by structural and normative aspects that originate outside of the relationship. However, as Jamieson pointed out, couple relationships: 'are not typically shaped in whatever way gives pleasure without the taint of practical, economic and other material circumstances' (Jamieson 1999:482). Therefore the nature of the relationships cannot be seen as something entirely up to the couple to negotiate about. Gender norms and notions about what a couple relationships ought to be are still at work. This gives rise to questions about the purity of the pure relationship and the necessity and room for couples to negotiate.

Third, behind the idea of an increased need for couples to negotiate lies an assumption that traditional gendered expressions and interpretations of intimacy are weathering away (Giddens 1991, 1992). Through reflexivity, open communication and mutual disclosure new forms of intimacy are negotiated. However, as Jamieson argues, couples still seem to express love, commitment and care in gendered ways, and that this is a:

> …very different dimension of intimacy from 'knowing', the mutual disclosure of the 'pure relationship'. /---/ For couples who live together, the time, money and effort each devotes to their household often symbolizes love and care for each other (Jamieson 1999:485).

In this respect actions speak louder than words. Couples still express and interpret love in terms of gendered acts and behaviour. Women's contributions of care and domestic work, and men's economic contributions and emotional support are still used to express, and are understood as, love and intimacy (Brannen & Moss 1991; Duncombe & Marsden 1993; Holmberg 1993; Jónasdottír 1991; Author 1999, 2002; Pahl 1989). The persistence of practical (and gendered) ways of expressing and understanding intimacy may not rule out other forms of intimacy, but it does cast a shadow over the assumption that expressions and interpretations of intimacy are up for negotiation.

To sum up, if couples still express love and intimacy in gendered ways, if they are *not* moving towards greater democracy and equality and are *not* freed from the bonds of tradition to the degree often suggested, then it is reasonable to question the notion of 'families of negotiation' i.e., how much need and space for negotiation that actually exists in couples' everyday lives.

3 The routinized, ritualized and gendered character of couples' everyday lives

Based on our own earlier empirical research we would like to suggest that the necessity and scope of negotiation in couples' everyday lives may be over-emphasized (Author & Author 2009; Author & Author 2005). Rather than being subject to negotiation, the everyday life of most couples has a highly routinized and ritualized character which provides them with a stable scheme of interpretation to understand each other and their relationship. This allows couples to live their lives comfortably, without having to continuously reflect and negotiate about various aspects of their relationship and everyday lives.

The routinized character of everyday life means that one does not need to consciously think about it in order to live it; the ritualization of everyday life means that there is a right and a wrong way of acting, according to social norms (Asplund 1987). Another way of putting it is that routines and rituals 'bracket' alternative ways of interpreting situations in everyday life. Hence, everyday life is built on a chain of decisions, but also (and perhaps more so) on a chain of *non-decisions*. Routines and rituals give everyday life a taken-for-granted nature and provide stability and continuity. This provides us with a 'natural attitude' towards everyday life in that we experience different aspects of it as familiar, given and self-evident (Schütz 1962).

A consequence of the natural attitude is that everyday life is not generally questioned or reflexively scrutinized, as long as it 'works' and makes sense for individuals; it makes life easier to live. In this way, couples can for the most part live their everyday lives without having to reflect on everyday matters and without experiencing a need to negotiate. A central aspect of couples' understanding of everyday life is a social and cultural notion of gender. Therefore, how couples 'do gender' (West & Zimmerman 1987) is important for understanding how they organize their everyday lives without negotiation. However, the fact that everyday life is taken for granted makes it difficult to see the gendered character of it. Gender is an important basis for understanding the world**,** for interpreting each other's actions and for ascribing traits and social roles to each other (Haavind 1984). The gendered aspect of everyday life means that normative expectations associated with gender are taken for granted and are seen as 'natural'. As a result gendered aspects of everyday life are seldom questioned and subsequently seldom taken up to discussion or negotiation.

Despite a variety of ways in which gender can be constructed, normative (traditional) notions about gender are still strong. Women and men are still often perceived as 'being' a certain way and as 'being good at' certain things. These constructions of gender are reflected in the practical organization of responsibility and labour in society in general as well as in families. Men are seen as breadwinners and it is therefore legitimate for them to devote more time to paid labour and to have more say in economic matters. Women are seen as nurturers and have responsibility for the daily running of the family and for children's needs. Though partners usually share breadwinning and childcare responsibilities in Sweden (Ellingsæter 1998), traditional gender roles still influence daily life.

Closely related to 'doing gender' is 'doing couple'. Heterosexual couple relationships can be seen as one of the most gender-infused social institutions since their very essence and point of departure is that a man and a woman live together as *gendered* individuals (Haavind 1984; Halleröd et al. 2007; Holmberg 1993; Thagaard 1997). Norms regarding heterosexual couple relationships, marriage and family are important for how couples organize and interpret their everyday lives, but also for how individuals interpret each other. Though the institution of marriage has undergone changes over the last few decades in the direction of gender equality, Berger & Kellner's (1974) argument that society has provided us with a taken-for-granted image of marriage and has socialized individuals into expectations of men's and women's roles in marriage and cohabitation, still seems relevant. Though individuals can quite freely choose a partner and can together organize their lives together, they are not as free to choose the *nature* of marriage or heterosexual relationships since 'the family as a system in space and in time is a social institution which pre-exists them and sets parameters to their choices' (Delphy & Leonard 1992:265-266). Marriage as an institution defines men's and women's obligations and entitlements in marriage.

Women and men learn appropriate gendered behaviour and understandings of this behaviour have a profound effect on how couple relationships are conceptualized and organized, and on how individuals in couples understand each other and themselves (DeVault 1991). An important aspect of the notions and expectations that are associated with couple relationships is power. Haavind describes the marital relationship as one that: 'assigns power to men and women in a way that constitutes a frame for interpretation of new single acts' (Haavind 1984:139). The asymmetrical distribution of power between women and men is systemized through norms inherent to marriage and is often seen as legitimate by both partners who agree that it is 'natural', 'most practical', 'most profitable' or 'an expression of their own particular love' (Author & Author 2009; Haavind 1984:145; Author & Author 2005). Since these marital norms and the arrangements they result in are seen as 'natural', they may not be seen by the couple as something that needs to be negotiated about.

To sum up, rather than being subject to negotiation, couples everyday life is to a large degree influenced by (traditional) notions of gender and couple. The taken for granted character of everyday life then can effectively limit the space and need to negotiate and mask the gendered character of everyday life.

4 The conceptualization of negotiation in family research

The ascribed importance of negotiation within research on the family is however not only a matter of to what degree couples have the space and need to negotiate; it is also a matter of conceptual clarity. Despite the prominent position within research on the family the concept of negotiation is seldom defined or elaborated.

In this section we will argue that the widespread use and diffuse meaning of negotiation may risk overlooking, perhaps even concealing, much of what takes place within couple relationships.[1]

Within the social sciences, there has been little consensus regarding the definition and use of the concept negotiation (Espwall et. al. 2001; Johansson 1997). While some researcher see negotiation as an open and specific form of interaction that can and should be distinguished from other forms of social interaction, (Johansson 1997; Author & Author 2009; Syltevik 2000) others define negotiation in a much broader sense. Anselm Strauss, leading proponent of the negotiated order approach for instance sees almost every social order as a negotiated order and emphasizes that negotiations are an aspect of most kinds of social relationships. According to him, negotiation is a way of 'getting things done' in social life (Strauss 1978). From this perspective it is not only possible to talk about open and explicit negotiations, but also implicit negotiations and 'silent bargains':

> Some negotiations may be very brief, made without any verbal exchange or obvious gestural manifestations; nevertheless, the parties may be perfectly aware of 'what they are doing' – they may not call this negotiation *bargaining*, but they surely regard its product as some sort of *worked out* agreement. Other negotiations may be so implicit that the respective parties may not be thoroughly aware that they have engaged in or completed a negotiated transaction (Strauss 1978:224-225; emphasis in original).

Much research on the family tends to lean on the negotiated order approach. This may be due to the fact that early in the development of the negotiated order approach, the family was identified as particularly characterized by silent bargains (Strauss 1978). When first introduced into family research in the 1970s, the concept of negotiation was used to conceptualize and address changes that were taking place in families (and in society) at that time. Researchers saw new families emerging, more democratic and gender equal, and less subjugated to rules of obligation and structural factors. Finch for instance argued that:

> The concept of negotiated commitments represents an alternative way of understanding family obligations which contrasts quite sharply with the idea of following moral rules (Finch 1989:181).

Decision-making in families was seen as more open to negotiation as couples oriented themselves and made use of their freedom of choice and room to manoeuvre, as Finch and Mason point out:

> Explanations which rely on the idea of following rules, or on the idea that action is determined by structural position in a rigid sense, leave little room for manoeuvre by individuals. By contrast, the concept of negotiation emphasises that individuals do have some room for manoeuvre (Finch and Mason 1993:60).

Conceptualizing what happens in families in terms of negotiation was an important step in understanding what goes on in families. The notion of the family as a unit built on consensus and complementary gender roles was shifted in favour of a picture of the family as an arena for individual and different (sometimes conflicting) interests (Syltevik 2000).

Even today the concept of negotiation is used to underline changes in gendered norms and structures and to highlight the freedom of choice available to individuals (Finch and Mason 1993; Roman 2004). Within research on the family, most areas of family life have been studied from the point of view of negotiation[2]. However, the way negotiation has often been used and discussed presents some problems. One is that the term is very seldom clearly conceptualized and defined. Definitions, when provided, are often vague and broad. Negotiation is seldom discussed in term of explicit negotiation, that is as 'open, round-the-table discussions prompted by specific needs and events' (Finch and Mason 1993:61).

[1] It is not our intention t to provide a complete overview of theoretical and empirical research on family that employs the concept of negotiation. Instead, our intention is to provide some examples of how the concept has been conceptualized and used, and thereby to encourage a theoretical and empirical discussion on negotiation in couple relationships.

[2] Some examples are the care of kin and relationships between children and other family members (Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten 1997; Bäck-Wiklund & Johansson 2003; Finch & Mason 1993; Krüger & Buchner 1994), the division and organization of housework, leisure time, money, household finances and child rearing (Ahrne & Roman 1997; Andenæs 1989; Björnberg & Kollind 2003; Brandth & Kvande 1991; Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten 1997; Daly 2002; Gullestad 1984; Roman 2004; Røthing 2004).

On the contrary, much of the literature that discusses negotiation in families refers to implicit negotiation, i.e. situations where partners negotiate without openly discussing the issue at hand or where they merely plan, organize, discuss and talk about their everyday lives. Hence, implicit negotiation does not necessarily entail partners' active involvement in or an open discussion of the terms for negotiation[3]. Used in this way, it is difficult to determine where negotiation starts and/or ends or how explicit or implicit it has to be before it ceases to be negotiation.

A consequence of this broad way of using the term negotiation is that it risks becoming vague, confusing, void of meaning or at worst, misleading since everything can be seen as *subject* to negotiation, and as a *result* of negotiation. Implicit negotiation says *no more* than that the organization of family life is a result of social interaction, i.e. that couples manage to correlate their subjective definitions of reality (Berger & Kellner 1974) in order to obtain what Goffman calls 'a working consensus' (1959:8). The lack of a clear definition makes it hard to distinguish between negotiation and other forms of interaction such as persuasion, manipulation, appealing to authority or duty, coercion, etc. by which couples can arrive at decisions. The vague conceptualizing of negotiation may therefore make us blind to other forms of interaction. The way that the concept of negotiation has come to be used can be seen as an example of what Sartori (1991) has called 'conceptual stretching'. Through 'definitional sloppiness' a concept is stretched to the point of meaninglessness and as a result is 'deprived of all heuristic validity' (Sartori 1991: 249). Such a concept never ceases to apply since it has no opposite – i.e. everything is negotiation (Sartori 1991).

To sum up, the way the concept of negotiation has been used within family research may act as blinders and limit our insights into and understanding of the processes that take place in couples. In fact, it may conceal more than it illuminates. The vague and implicit character of the concept risks leading to conceptual stretching where almost everything that happens in families is seen as subject to, or as a result of negotiation. This may make it difficult to differentiate between negotiation and other forms of interaction and obscure the possibility that couples have a variety of ways through which to reach decisions.

5 Concluding discussion

In this paper we have attempted to critically examine negotiation as it has been conceptualized and used in research on families and intimate relationships. We have pointed out two possible problems. The first is connected to the often-made assumption that modern families, as a result of the transformation of intimacy, to a large extent need to negotiate to make everyday life work. We argue that the space and need for such negotiation may be over-estimated and that couples' everyday life to a large degree is still influenced by quite gender traditional roles and expectations connected to what it means to live together as man and women. This leaves little need or room for negotiations in couples' everyday lives. Conceptualizing and examining family life in terms of negotiation may also conceal or downplay inequalities within families by seeing them as negotiated outcomes and the result of free choices. We would like to make clear that we are not ruling out the possibility that couples today are more free to 'do gender' and 'do couple', and organize their lives in non-traditional ways than for half a century ago. What we do question is the understanding of negotiation as a characteristic of more or less all couples as well as the ascribed importance of negotiation in the lives of couples. Negotiation may very be of significance in couples' everyday lives. However as long as researchers do not utilize a clearer definition of the concept, there is little way of knowing.

This leads us to the second possible problem. The vague and broad way that negotiation has been used in research makes it difficult to identify and distinguish negotiation from other forms of interaction that couples engage in to make decisions and to get them through everyday life. The lack of a clear definition risks concealing the multitude of possible ways besides negotiation by which couples arrive at how to live their life together. Through conceptual stretching, negotiation risks becoming void of real meaning; the fact that couples manage to establish working routines and rituals for e.g. who picks up the children from school and who goes food shopping does not necessarily imply the presence on negotiation. It could be a sign of researchers conflating negotiation with the type of practical organization of everyday tasks that couples and families always have had to deal with. With this in mind, we would suggest that as researchers we would have much to gain by being more stringent in the way we talk about and use the concept of negotiation. If negotiation is to have be a fruitful concept role in research on the family it needs to be clarified, developed and elaborated.

[3] See Espwall et. al. 2001; Author & Author 2009; Author & Author 2005; Syltevik 2000 for a critical discussion of implicit/explicit negotiation.

This would allow us to more accurately determine the need and space for negotiation in couples' lives. As a first step towards a more clear definition we would like to end this article with one suggestion for a more stringent understanding of negotiation. One way of demarcating the concept negotiation is to reserve its use for describing and discussing *explicit* negotiation. Johansson (1997), drawing on Strauss (1979) and Elster (1992), has attempted to theoretically define the concept of negotiation in a more explicit way. According to Johansson negotiation can be seen as a special form of interaction through which "the conditions for changes regarding relationship patterns are determined' (Johansson 1997:11, our translation). By pointing out three characteristics of, or prerequisites for negotiation, he distinguishes it from other forms of interaction. First, there must exist perceived disagreement or tension between partners' interests. In the case of agreement there is no need for negotiation (Johansson 1997). In couples, this tension is born out of differing interests. This is a result of different opinions, or preferred outcomes in a specific matter, or of partners' different positions. Second, in a negotiation more than one possible option or outcome must exist. If only one option or outcome is in reality possible, there is no room for negotiation (Johansson 1997). In research on couples and families this can be an important heuristic tool in empirically identifying negotiation. The absence of alternative possible outcomes suggests that one partner has the power to prevent a matter from being subject to negotiation. A third prerequisite is that the interests of the partners are 'mixed', that is, that they partly coincide and are partly in conflict with each other. Each individual has differing goals and interests, but both also have a shared interest in, and more to gain by reaching agreement (Johansson 1997). In the context of the family, mixed interests can be understood in terms of the fact that partners are mutually dependent on each other and on finding satisfactory solutions since exit is probably not a preferred option for most couples.

By demarcating negotiation in this fundamental way it becomes possible to not only differentiate negotiation from other forms of interaction that takes place in couples, but also to identify situations in which there exists a potential for negotiation. The understanding of negotiation as a special form of interaction through which relational patterns and terms for change are determined means that we can look for negotiation in situations where the taken-for-granted character of everyday life is questioned. This happens when couples face situations to which no given or established routines or rituals apply, e.g. the arrival of their first child, a job offer in another part of the country, unemployment, death in the family or major economic investments such as buying a house (Author & Author 2009). In situations such as these, everyday life is open to re-interpretation and notions about e.g. gender and couple may become visible. This opening may create possibilities and space for couples to negotiate, i.e. to articulate differing interests and shared goals, and to consider a variety of possible actions. However, it is important to point out that negotiation is not the only form of interaction available to the couple by which to restore the taken-for-granted character of everyday life. Negotiation is not required in the case of complete agreement about how to handle a situation, and not possible in the case of a unilateral decision by one partner. In addition, for negotiation to take place couples must reflect on and distance themselves from their everyday life and see alternative ways of doing things. However this can be difficult to achieve given the routinized, ritualized and gendered character of couples' everyday lives (Author & Author 2009; Author & Author 2005; Benjamin 2003).

A more narrow understanding and utilization of negotiation, as suggested above, can open up for new insights into the processes that take place in families and contribute to a better understanding of what happens in families and couples – both that which is negotiation, and that which is not. It would allow us to gain sight of and analyze forms of interaction other than negotiation. It also becomes possible to study the extent to which negotiation takes place within families and to find answers to a number of questions: in what matters do couples negotiate, how important are different power resources and how are they used, what does the negotiation process look like and does it vary according to factors such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, education level and gender ideology. A few studies have begun to shed light on some of these questions. Syltevik (2000) for instance found negotiation to be more necessary, and therefore more frequent, during certain phases of a relationship and more common in couples with higher levels of education and where one or both have an egalitarian gender ideology. Author & Author (2009) found that negotiation was quite rare and that when couples did negotiate, it was in out-of the-ordinary situations where 'normal' routines and rituals were inadequate. Using negotiation in ways that are more clearly defined allows us to go beyond taken-for-granted assumptions about what goes on in families.

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