

## If not negotiation, then what?

### Gender equality and the organization of everyday life in Swedish couples

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#### Abstract

Freed from the bonds of traditional gendered norms, responsibilities and obligations, it has been argued that negotiation is a key concept for understanding how modern couples organize their common life together. Interviews with Swedish couples cause us to question this assumption. In this article we argue that negotiations are relatively unusual in couple relationships. We found that couples seldom experience the reason, room space or need to negotiate. This can in part be understood from the perspective of seeing everyday life as a matter of practical coordination, i.e. as something we strive to master rather than something we try to change or critically reflect upon. We found that routines and rituals were a guiding force in how couples organize their everyday lives. “Doing gender”, “doing couple”, external circumstances and agreement were all central aspects in making the everyday lives of the couples we interviewed work.

*Key Words: Gender equality, negotiation, everyday life, family, couples*

#### Introduction

Couple relationships in high modernity have often been characterized as democratic and gender equal. The Scandinavian countries have often been described as having advanced the farthest in this regard (Björnberg, 1997; Ellingsæter, 1998; Lewis, 1992; Roman & Vogler, 1999; SOU, 2005:66). This modern family has been described as a “negotiating family” (Beck, 1992; Stacey, 1990) since negotiation has often been seen as a key concept for understanding how they organize their common life together (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992).

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Given this picture of the modern family, we wanted to investigate negotiation in Swedish couples. In our previous work, we had initially expected to find that negotiation was a central aspect of how Swedish couples arrive at ways of organizing their everyday lives. This was not what we found however. Instead, we found that couples very rarely use negotiation as a way to make everyday life work and we found few examples of what we would call negotiation (Nyman & Evertsson, 2005). Our aim in the current article, built on the assumptions from our earlier empirical findings, is to investigate why negotiation in couples is not as prevalent as is often assumed. The question we ask here is how, if not through negotiation, do couples make decisions and arrive at ways of organizing their lives together?

This study's use of in-depths interviews contributes to research on families and couples by offering a more nuanced picture of negotiation in couples and of how they go about organizing their everyday lives. In addition, it helps provide a better understanding of other forms of interaction in couple relationships. The results of this study also have policy implications for gender equality in Sweden (and perhaps other countries), since policies aimed at promoting gender equality often rest on an underlying assumption that couples negotiate. Implications for policy will be developed in the concluding discussion.

Below we provide a brief overview of how the concept of negotiation in family research has been used and understood. We then present some methodological considerations. Following this, we discuss our theoretical framework before moving on to the presentation of our results. Finally, in the discussion section of the paper we summarize our findings and discuss them in terms of theory. We also discuss implications of our results for efforts aimed at promoting gender equality.

### *Research on the Negotiating Family*

In both Swedish and international research on the family, negotiation is often assumed to be a necessary and important part of couples' everyday lives. The focus on negotiation in family research is associated with the notion that modern couples can more freely choose how they will organize their relationship and common life together. Modern couples and families are often characterized as negotiating families (Beck, 1992; Stacey, 1990) in modernity theory and family

research. Freed from the bonds of traditional gendered norms, responsibilities and obligations, it is argued, it becomes necessary to reflect over relationships; active choices and free and open communication then become imperatives. An underlying belief is that negotiation can transform couple relationships into more democratic and gender equal relationships (Giddens, 1992).

A number of topics and areas of family life have been seen as subject to as well as outcomes of negotiation between partners, for example the care of kin and relationships between children and other family members as well as the division and organization of housework, leisure time and household finances (Ahrne & Roman 1997; Andenæs, 1989; Björnberg & Kollind, 2003; Brandth & Kvande, 1991; Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten, 1997; Bäck-Wiklund & Johansson, 2003; Daly, 2002; Finch & Mason, 1993; Gullestad, 1984; Krüger & Buchner, 1994; Roman, 2004; Røthing, 2004). It has been convincingly argued that the mere fact that discussions and conflicts can arise regarding these aspects of everyday life can be seen as a sign of increased gender equality since it reflects a less rigid and gender-bound division of work and responsibilities and a challenging of traditional gendered norms (Roman, 2004).

The application of the concept of negotiation on families has its merits. When first introduced into family research in the 1970s the concept of negotiation was a way of conceptualizing and addressing the changes toward gender equality that were taking place in society at large as well as in families. It underlined changes in gendered norms and structures and the increased freedom available to individuals to organize everyday life in less gender-traditional ways. The concept negotiation made visible and facilitated the inclusion of issues of gender (in)equality, power and conflict in the study of families and intimate relationships (Finch, 1989; Finch & Mason, 1993; Roman, 2004; Syltevik, 2000).

We argue however that after several decades of use, the concept of negotiation in family research has come to be used primarily to describe contemporary families as less bound by traditional gendered rules and norms. An unfortunate aspect of this is that negotiation is seldom clearly conceptualized and defined. Definitions, when provided, are often vague and broad. Much of the literature that discusses negotiation in families refers to negotiation that is implicit rather than explicit “open round-the-table discussions prompted by specific needs and events” (Finch &

Mason, 1993, p. 61). Negotiation often refers to the subtle ways partners communicate that do not entail open discussions. Partners reach agreement without openly discussing the terms for negotiation. At other times negotiation is used to refer to the fact that partners plan, organize, discuss and talk about their everyday lives. Hence, implicit negotiation does not necessarily entail partners' active involvement. We argue that negotiation, when used to describe how couples discuss and coordinate different aspects of everyday life, is something that couples have always done.

When using negotiation in such a broad sense, it is difficult to determine where negotiation starts and ends or how explicit or implicit it has to be before it ceases to be negotiation. Not only is everything seen as *subject* to negotiation, but everything is also seen as being a *result* of negotiation. Used in this vague way, the concept of negotiation says *no more* than that the organization of family life is a result of social interaction. If negotiation is nothing more than another word for social interaction, it can be argued that couples have always negotiated. When used this way negotiation 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, p. 249). We argue that this makes it difficult to empirically distinguish between what is negotiation/negotiated and what is not. In light of this, a relevant question is to what extent the notion of the modern negotiating family is in fact a result of an unclear and broad definition of negotiation.

### *Theoretical Rationale*

#### *Towards a narrower conceptualization of negotiation*

We argue that if the concept negotiation is to have heuristic validity, it needs to be more clearly defined. To help us develop a definition of negotiation, we turn to the Swedish sociologist Johansson (1997) who, drawing on Strauss (1979) and Elster (1992), sees negotiation as a special form of interaction through which "the conditions for changes regarding relationship patterns are determined" (Johansson, 1997, p. 11, our translation). Defined in this way, negotiations are

always explicit and prompted by specific needs and events. In addition to explicitness, Johansson discusses three criteria that help to define negotiation and distinguish 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. We argue that in couples, tension can arise out of differing interests or conflicting opinions regarding for instance the division of paid and domestic labor, financial management or child rearing. Second, in a negotiation more than one possible option or outcome must exist. If only one option or outcome is in practice possible, there is no space for negotiation and nothing to negotiate about. In research on couples and families this criterion can be an important heuristic tool in empirically identifying negotiation and thereby distinguishing it from other forms of interaction. A third criterion is that the interests of the negotiating partners are mixed, that is, that their interests partly coincide and partly conflict. Individuals may have differing goals and interests, but they also have a shared interest in and more to gain by reaching agreement. We argue that in the context of the family, mixed interests can be understood in terms of partners' mutual dependency and on their desire to find satisfactory solutions since exit from the relationship seldom is the preferred option.

To sum up, a clearer conceptualization of negotiation would facilitate greater possibilities to identify negotiation when it takes place. At the same time it makes us aware of the fact that not everything that takes place in families can be seen as and explained in terms of negotiation. A clearer conceptualization of negotiation would challenge us to ask ourselves why negotiation does not occur more often and to ask, if not negotiation, then what?

#### *The routinized and ritualized character of everyday life*

In this section, we argue that a theoretical perspective that focuses on the *routinized* and *ritualized* character of everyday life can be a fruitful way to increase our understanding of what goes on in families and of why we found so little negotiation in the couples we interviewed. Peoples' everyday lives can be seen as routinized (Schütz, 1962) and ritualized (Asplund, 1987). The routinized character of everyday life means that people do not need to consciously think about it in order to live it. The ritualized character means that there is a perceived right and a

wrong way of doing things. Another way of putting it is that routines and rituals "bracket" alternative ways of interpreting situations in everyday life and give everyday life a taken-for-granted character that provides stability and continuity. This provides us with a "natural attitude" toward everyday life in that we experience it as familiar, given and self-evident (Schütz 1962). The natural attitude is the basis for what Giddens (1991) calls practical consciousness, which allows agents to concentrate on the task at hand without necessarily having to reflect on why or how the task should be performed.

From this perspective, everyday life can be seen as built more on a chain of *non-decisions* than on a chain of decisions in that it is not generally questioned or reflexively scrutinized, as long as it works and makes sense. This natural attitude towards everyday life does not mean we lack the ability to reflect over and scrutinize our lives, or to actively make decisions. It only means that we are not inclined to do this as long as nothing out of the ordinary occurs in everyday life. Simply put, the routines and rituals we establish in everyday life provide us with short cuts by which to live our everyday lives. Without these short cuts, everyday life would consist of an endless number of small decisions and would be unbearably complicated. Routines and rituals can be seen as an "auto-pilot" that makes navigating through everyday life easier. Within the context of family this provides couples with a stable scheme of interpretation to understand each other and their relationship. This allows couples to live their lives without having to continuously reflect upon or negotiate the various aspects of their everyday lives. Consequently, couples may perceive decisions as non-decisions and as "just making themselves" and therefore may not experience a need, the space or a reason to negotiate in the course of their everyday lives.

### *"Doing gender" in everyday life<sup>2</sup>*

Gender is an important basis for understanding the world, for interpreting one's own and each other's actions and for ascribing traits and social roles to one another. Gender is however not something we *have*; rather it is something we *do*, continuously, in interaction with others

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, we use the terminology "doing gender" and "doing couple" in accordance with a social constructionist perspective. The use of "do" and "doing" emphasizes gender and couple as something socially constructed.

(Haavind, 1984; Fenstermaker, West & Zimmerman, 1991; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Though normative notions about gender tend to be strong and quite stable, they are not static (Dryden, 1999; Gherardi, 1994, 1995; Haavind, 1982). Gender can be constructed in a variety of ways and is changeable over time and space. The way women and men “do gender” is based on what they know to be generally accepted notions of appropriate attitudes and activities for one’s sex category (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.127). A central component of the “doing of gender” is the affirmation of gender difference (Connell, 1987), and this difference is in turn affirmed by what women and men do, for instance how household work is shared.

How gender is “done” is intimately connected to how couples organize their everyday lives. In this respect, everyday life is gendered; people have normative expectations about women’s and men’s behavior, traits and competence, which are taken for granted and seen as “natural”. Women and men are perceived as “being” a certain way and as “being good at” certain things. It can however be difficult to see the gendered character of everyday life since we tend to take everyday life for granted. “Doing gender” in gender traditional ways provides us with familiar and acknowledged routines by which to organize our everyday lives as well as with socially sanctioned norms and rituals that legitimize our actions. Hence, by going with the (gender) flow we not only do what we think is expected of us as man or woman, we also experience that what we do is the right thing to do. As a result gendered aspects of everyday life are seldom questioned and subsequently seldom taken up to discussion or negotiation.

#### *“Doing couple” in everyday life*

Closely related to “doing gender” is “doing couple” (Halleröd, Diaz & Stocks, 2007). 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; Holmberg, 1993; Thagaard, 1997). From a social constructionist perspective, couples engage in constructing or “doing” their couple relationship according to social and cultural norms regarding heterosexual couple relationships, marriage and family. These norms in turn are important for how couples organize and interpret their everyday

lives and for how individuals in couples interpret each other. Berger and Kellner (1974) argue that society provides us with a taken-for-granted image of marriage that creates expectations of men's and women's roles in marriage and cohabitation. Though individuals can quite freely choose a partner they are not as free to choose the nature of marriage (Delphy & Leonard, 1992). Marriage as an institution defines men's and women's obligations and entitlements in marriage. Berk (1985) argues that the home can be seen as a "gender factory" where the doing of everyday tasks reflects gender ideals. Women and men learn appropriate gendered behavior, and understandings of this behavior have a profound effect on how couple relationships are conceptualized and organized (DeVault, 1991). Here too, differences can be seen as fundamental for the construction of heterosexual couple relationships. By adhering to gendered norms and expectations we construct ourselves as "proper" couples and confirm our couple relationships and each other as good husbands and wives. Since the marital norms and the arrangements they result in are seen as natural and feel right, they may not be seen by the couple as something that needs to be negotiated about.

## Method

### *Participants*

The empirical data consists of interviews with eleven heterosexual and ethnically Swedish couples (married or cohabiting<sup>3</sup>) conducted in 2000-2001.<sup>4</sup> Criteria for recruitment of the interviewees aimed at maximizing sample diversity regarding age, relationship duration and the presence of children. The youngest person we interviewed in this study was 27 and the oldest 58 years old. Four of the eleven couples had at least one child. One couple had been together about 3 years, four had been together between 5 and 10 ten years, and six couples between 11 and 17 years. All of the couples resided in an urban area in the northern part of Sweden and were dual-earner couples. Couples' participation was completely voluntary since they were recruited through flyers

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<sup>3</sup> In Sweden, many couples live together without being married. This form of living is referred to as cohabitation and has been recognized and accepted for several decades in Sweden. The cohabiting couples in our sample lived as as-married couples regarding e.g. the length of their relationship, level of commitment and the practical organization of family life.

<sup>4</sup> See Stocks, Diaz & Halleröd (2007) for more information.



posted in public places, advertisement in a local newspaper and through snowballing procedures, in which the researchers' acquaintances and previously interviewed couples were asked to spread the word about our study to couples that might be interested in participating. No payment or reward was given to the participants. Couples who were interested in participating in our study contacted the researchers either via e-mail or telephone. Our sample was an "opportunistic" sample (Lampard & Peggs, 2007, p.10) in that all those who met the sample criteria (most of those who contacted us) were included in the study. This means that our interviewees were interested in discussing the topics with us and were most likely couples that were not having relationship and/or financial troubles.

### *Procedure*

Each couple was interviewed together as a couple as well as separately. Couples were allowed to choose where and when the interviews would take place. All of the couples chose to be interviewed in their homes except for one couple that was interviewed at the university. In almost all cases the interviews took place in the living room or the kitchen, in the evening or on the weekend. All of the interviews were tape-recorded. The couple interviews were conducted by a team of two researchers, one male and one female. A week or two later, partners were interviewed separately – the woman by the female researcher and the man by the male researcher. Couple interviews took on average three hours while individual interviews were somewhat shorter. In our analyses here, all quotes come from couple interviews. All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim in their entirety; the passages used in this article were translated to English by the authors. Details about interviewees such as their own names and the names of children and relatives, occupations and anecdotes, have been changed in order to protect their anonymity.

The interview guide was semi-structured and covered a number of areas central to couples' everyday lives that we were interested in investigating. The main topics were housework, money, leisure time, social contacts, careers/education, children and the couple relationship and its meaning. Most questions were open-ended and allowed for and encouraged reflection and

narration. The design used resulted in in-depth and reflected discussions on a number of topics, some of which were not explicitly asked about but were introduced by the interviewees.

The starting assumption in the analysis of the interviews is that the interviewees' stories reflect their experiences and subjectivities (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003) and thereby give researchers a glimpse of their everyday lives. At the same time, we are aware that interviewees present themselves, make sense of their experiences and construct their identities as individuals and as couples in relation to, and together with the interviewers (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). However, as Joffe (1999) argues, as researchers, we can go beyond interviewees' conscious representations through a theoretically driven analysis of interview data. Throughout the analysis, we have therefore strived to integrate empirical observations with theoretical understanding.

Inspired by the grounded theory approach (Glaser 1978) all interviews were initially read and an open coding of them was done in which several substantive codes emerged. Several themes eventually became discernable as a result of this process. One such theme was the theme for this article – negotiation, or rather the absence of negotiation. A selective coding process was then done in order to find examples of how and why couples do *not* negotiate in their everyday lives and to gain an understanding for the complexities of this phenomenon (Seidel & Kelle, 1995).

Not all of those interviewed in the study are cited in this text. The quotations used are those that most clearly illustrate the points we try to make. Having said that, it is important to point out that the results presented in this text are not unique to the couples presented.

## Results

As we have pointed out above, we found little indication that negotiation is common in our interviews. The few examples of negotiation we did find were associated with situations in which the taken-for-granted character of everyday life was questioned and no given or established routines or rituals applied or existed. The few examples of negotiation that we found suggest that negotiation is not about the day-to-day organization of everyday life, for example who cooks, cleans or takes the children to activities. Instead, we found that negotiations, when they occur, tended to address larger fundamental questions related to the very nature and form of a couple's

relationship and life together.<sup>5</sup> However, this did not necessarily mean that all questions of a fundamental or relationship-changing nature automatically ended up on the negotiating table (see Evertsson & Nyman, 2008).

In light of this lack of negotiation, the question we seek to find answers to here is how, if not via negotiation, do couples arrive at decisions and ways of doing things? Those we interviewed reported that decisions about everyday life were usually made without much thought and without giving rise to any major discussions or negotiations. A common response was that “it just turned out that way” (see also Magnusson, 2006; Stocks, Diaz & Halleröd, 2007). One way to understand this is that the routines and rituals of everyday life circumscribe the reason, the need and the space for negotiation regarding everyday matters. Below, we will discuss four examples of this: “doing gender”, “doing couple”, external circumstances and agreement.

#### *“Doing Gender” in Everyday Life*

A clear pattern among the couples we interviewed was that routines and rituals of their everyday lives were to a large degree gendered. Most of the couples we interviewed allocated tasks according to traditional notions of gender. With very few exceptions, it was the woman in the couple who had the main responsibility for housework – grocery shopping, planning meals and cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and caring for children. Other tasks were often seen, explicitly or implicitly, as being the man’s, for example taking care of the car and small house maintenance tasks. Even taking care of the family’s finances was often gendered (see Nyman, 1999; Nyman & Evertsson, 2005). However, the couples we interviewed did not see this division of labor and responsibility as connected to gender. Rather, they saw it as a result of personality, interests, competence and what they saw as most practical. Nora and Nelson, for instance, pointed out that it was most practical that Nelson pay the bills and take care of bank errands since this was done via the Internet, which coincided with Nelson’s interests:

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<sup>5</sup> Our observation, that negotiation tends to be about larger more fundamental issues, is also supported by preliminary analyses of interviews with individuals in same-sex couples, that are part of our on-going research project that is funded by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation.

**Nelson:** Well, we pay [bills] via Internet banking. [I have] been interested in computers for so many years, so it just seemed natural (. . .) since I'm the one who signed up for this service, to pay via internet.

As in the case of Nelson and Nora above, the interviewed couples' understanding of their division of housework was often based on competence and interest. Men's lack of interest and competence in housework was often given as reasons for their lower contribution (and women's greater contribution), by both the women and men interviewed. Olle explained to us that he completely lacks competence and interest regarding some household tasks:

**Olle:** You can never get me to see when it's time to change curtains. I mean, it's completely uninteresting for me, it doesn't exist. I've sworn myself free from houseplants because they died instantly when I took care of them. So I don't want to have responsibility for them. But I take responsibility for what I can handle and that's worked out well.

Lisa told us that the main reason that she does most of the housework is that her husband Lorentz is terrible at cleaning. Lorentz himself said that there's no reason that he should do things that he's neither interested in nor good at. The important thing according to Lorentz, is that both of them contribute to their common household:

**Lorentz:** [Lisa] maybe clean[s] more and I chop more wood. [Even if it means that] we go by what's traditional male and female and I don't know if there's anything wrong with [that]. (. . .) That a woman should do manly things and a man do female things is just stupid I think. What really matters is what you're interested in.

While Lisa and Lorentz's division of housework reflects traditional ideas about women's and men's interests and competence, it also shows how gender – masculinity and femininity – is constructed through difference via the fulfillment of gendered expectations regarding housework. This quote also illustrates how their gendered division of labor is perceived by Lorenz as something that feels right.

In the same way that couples claimed that men lacked competence and interest in housework, they also claimed that women had greater competence for these tasks. While referring to her personality and competence regarding housework and cooking to explain why she does more housework, Yvonne also explains why her husband Yngve does less:

**Yvonne:** I make breakfast while Yngve takes the dog for a walk. But I'm also very effective, so while I make breakfast I start the washing machine too. (. . .) I think faster than you, I organize and fix things and so really, you never have a chance to participate, even if you'd like to sometimes.

Perceptions of Yvonne's personality and competence make her greater contribution to housework seem natural, self-evident and right to them both. When it comes to housework, not being able to do a task well, or a lack of interest is for a man a sufficient reason for not having to do certain tasks. However the same does not seem to apply to women. None of the women we interviewed gave lack of interest or competence as a reason for not doing housework even though they felt their partner should do more.

We also found these patterns in the other couples that are not presented here. Behaviour that could be interpreted as gender inequality was often legitimized or explained as something else, such as personal/individual interests or competence, demonstrations of love and affection or as the most practical way of doing things (see also Bekkengen 2002; Haavind 1982; Magnusson 2008). This gendered pattern works in men's favor. Despite the generally high level of awareness of issues related to gender equality, it is apparent from our interviews that quite traditional notions about gender are still at work. However the couples themselves are seldom aware of these

gendered patterns, and when they are, they are seen as unproblematic. They are instead seen as more or less self-evident, natural and as expressions of individual interests or competence. By doing what a man or woman sees as natural and expected of them and that which feels right, individuals “do gender” and thereby contribute to a reproduction of traditional gendered norms and behavior. In light of this, our finding that couples seldom negotiate may not be so surprising. The gendered routines and rituals associated with couples’ division of housework make it difficult for couples to see a need or reason to negotiate in these matters.

### *“Doing Couple” through Complementarity*

In addition to doing gender, we also found was that the couples we interviewed “did couple”. One of the most prominent ways of constructing “couple” was through complementarity. The couples we interviewed explained that they, as man and woman, have different roles and responsibilities within the relationship, and that these roles and responsibilities complement each other. This idea seemed in fact to be fundamental for our couples’ perceptions of what it means to be a couple. We found that complementarity had considerable influence on how couples organize their family life and thereby was a central aspect of the routinization and ritualization of everyday life. As we argue here, it can also help shed light on why negotiation seldom takes place.

We found two aspects of complementarity in the interviews. The first was that partners ascribe each other different but complementary roles and responsibilities that manifested themselves in a gendered division of labor. The quotations below illustrate this first aspect of complementarity:

**Lisa:** Lorentz does a lot, but maybe not cleaning. (. . .) But I know that he can do a lot of other things. He spends a lot of time on the house, like chopping wood, carrying in wood and I don’t do much of that. So I mean, to be honest, Lorentz does a lot, just not cleaning. But then again there’s a lot that I don’t do that Lorentz does.

Yngve's account also illustrates that he and Yvonne have divided tasks according to gender:

**Yngve:** At home, I'm not as active as I am in our cabin. There, I have a bunch of projects, building and stuff. (. . .) We are equally as active but the division of labor isn't that I cook or cook more often because we're at the cabin.

Lisa's and Yngve's accounts highlight their gendered roles, the gendered character of their division of responsibility and labor in the home, as well as the way their division of tasks complement each other.

The second aspect of complementarity was the importance of perceived fairness. A gendered division of housework was considered acceptable, even desirable as long as partners' contributions to the good of the common household were perceived as fair. Below the couple Lisa and Lorentz illustrate this second aspect.

**Lorentz:** The most important thing is that you do something. The most important thing isn't that *I* do the dishes because I don't like doing dishes, just to be equal. But I can do other things instead. It would be different if Lisa always did everything and I lied down on the couch or something, but as long as both of us do things that benefit the household it's ok.

**Lisa:** I take more responsibility for the children and cleaning and stuff. And Lorentz takes more responsibility for other things in our home. But I mean, basic is that both of us do things [for the household].

The way couples "do couple" through complementarity has implications for how they understand and practice gender equality. Gender equality is not firmly rooted in couples' everyday lives and perceptions and does not seem to have a given meaning. Gender equality seems to be an

allusive concept that couples themselves must find ways of defining and practicing in their everyday lives. Lisa explains:

**Lisa:** What is gender equality, what are we striving towards? The bottom line is that neither Lorentz nor I have prevented the other from doing what we want, job or career-wise. (. . .) But when it comes down to it, we do like we've just explained. We prioritize different areas that are male or female. (. . .) But if Lorentz feels like baking, he does.

Lisa argues here that their way of sharing responsibility and work is gender equal, despite its gendered and complementary nature. As the quote from Lisa illustrates, gender equality seems to be not so much about an *obligation* to challenge gendered patterns. Rather gender equality is that women and men have the *freedom* and the right to challenge and go against traditional gendered patterns when it suits them. It is apparent that our couples understand gender equality as fairness (see Evertsson & Nyman, 2008; Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003). Fairness, in turn, is defined as each person taking their (gendered) responsibility for *their* areas and tasks. Both Lisa and Lorentz are well aware that their division of housework is traditionally gendered. However, they see this division as fair and therefore as gender equal. Lorentz explains:

**Lorentz:** [gender equality] is such a broad and unclear word. If you add the aspect that we both take equal amounts of responsibility for our household, then we're very gender equal.

“Doing couple” through complementarity can help us to understand the limited use of negotiation. As long as everyday life works and partners are perceived as contributing fairly to the family, negotiation is superfluous. There is no need to negotiate in order to make everyday life



work if it works anyway. Nor is there a need to negotiate in order to achieve gender equality, if the couple relationship is already perceived as gender equal.

Given couples' understanding of the relationship between complementarity, fairness and gender equality, it becomes easier to understand the apparent gap between the official definition of gender equality in Sweden and the ways that gender equality is practiced in couple relationships. This can also shed light on the gap between statistics showing that 90 percent of Swedish women and men are in favor of gender equality and see themselves as gender equal on the one hand, and those showing that that only 20 percent of couples share housework somewhat equally on the other (Ahrne & Roman, 1997; Nyman, 2002).

### *External Circumstances*

The limited use of negotiation among our couples can also be understood in terms of a perceived lack of viable options. In the interviews, we found that everyday life was framed by a number of external circumstances that often led to experiences of limited room to maneuver and choose courses of action. Working life comprises the most obvious external circumstance that structures couples' everyday lives and sets limits for what choices are available and feasible. Couples must coordinate demands from jobs with for example demands that stem from the care for children and their school day and other activities. These demands circumscribe what options are perceived as possible and thereby limit the possibilities as well as the need to negotiate. A large portion of everyday life is simply structured by demands from several directions. Couples' stories reveal that their main concern is to make everyday life work. Therefore, their efforts and thoughts center on the practical coordination of the various aspects of everyday life. Everyday life then seems to be more a matter of practical coordination than of negotiation.

Rasmus and Rita tell us about how their work hours determine who picks up their son from daycare. Rita says:

**Rita:** It's me who picks him up when I work the day shift. And when I work the night shift, I bring him to daycare and Rasmus picks him up. So there isn't that much to discuss.

We saw the same pattern in the interview with Veronica and Verner. During the period when Veronica had a hour long commute to her job, Verner as the one who had to take care of many of the daily household tasks:

**Verner:** Veronica came home so late, that if we wanted to eat a hot meal together, I was the one who had to make it. We couldn't make dinner together, or Veronica make it when she came home. That wouldn't work.

In one of the couple's, one partner's physical health constituted an external circumstance that influenced how they organized their everyday life. The way that Martin and Maria shared housework and other tasks was formed by Maria's physical limitations that made lifting difficult for her:

**Maria:** I can't lift heavy things because I've had hip replacement surgery. That's just how it is. Period! Martin does the vacuum cleaning and the laundry while I do the ironing. I have a feeling that [Martin] cleans the bathroom a little more often.

**Martin:** A lot of the way we share [household work] stems out of [Maria's] physical capacity. I'm stronger than her and have been able to do more.

The examples above show how external circumstances can create a *perception* of there being no other viable options available, no other way of doing things. This in turn contributes to a feeling of there being very little room to maneuver and hence, of there being nothing to negotiate

about. These examples shed light on why negotiation is unusual in couples and on why couples often responded that things “just turned out that way”.

### *Agreement*

The assumption that negotiation is a common aspect of couple relationships presumes disagreement and conflicting interests, priorities and desires. However our interviewed couples reported often being in agreement. Our interviews show that many decisions that are part of everyday life are seen as non-decisions since they stem out of agreement between partners. Where partners are in agreement, there is no need for negotiation. We found that even large, life-changing decisions can be arrived at without conflicts or negotiation.

The two examples we present here are from couples that had bought their first house shortly before being interviewed. Despite the magnitude of such a decision, neither couple reported experiencing any form of negotiation. For Verner and Veronica, buying a house was a non-question since they shared the same desire and ideal. They both had similar pictures of the ideal home with them into the relationship. For them, buying a house was more a matter of timing and finding the right property.

**Veronica:** Both of us grew up in houses in the countryside. So from the start [we've both felt] that a real home isn't a row house in the middle [of the city] with neighbors right next door.

Olivia and Olle were in complete agreement about buying a house and about which area they wanted to live in. For them, the question of buying a house was a symbol for their relationship and their commitment to each other.

**Olivia:** We've had some downs in our relationship. (. . .) We both felt it important to show each other that we're there for each other. So we said, if we get a house now, together, it'll mean more work but we're both ok with that.

The question of buying a house was for Olivia and Olle a part of the larger issue of taking their relationship to the next level of commitment. Buying a house was for them a way of expressing their continued and increased love for and commitment to each other and their future together. Since both of them agreed that they were ready for this, and that buying a house was one way of doing this, no negotiation was seen as necessary.

As our examples here show, negotiation is not seen as necessary when partners are in agreement. Agreement effectively eliminates or reduces the perceived need for negotiation since there is no need to find other options or alternatives.

### Discussion

A great deal of research on modern couples rests on an assumption that negotiation is a necessary part of couples' everyday lives. In this article we have investigated why negotiation in couples is not as prevalent as is often assumed and how couples make decisions and arrive at ways of organizing their lives together. We found that couples' major concern was to make everyday life work as smoothly as possible. Everyday life was primarily a matter of practical coordination, something to master rather than try to change or critically reflect upon. We found that routines and rituals were a guiding force in how couples organize their everyday lives. "Doing gender", "doing couple", external circumstances and agreement were all central aspects in making the everyday lives of the couples we interviewed work. This is not to say that people lack the capacity to reflect or the will to change. However, in everyday life, filled with duties, obligations, demands and responsibilities, simple and familiar paths through everyday life feel right and seem to be preferable. We take paths that lead to non-decisions rather than those that force us to think in new ways and to actively change our ways of doing things. If possible, we would like to get

through our day without having to question the many routines and rituals that comprise our everyday lives. Not questioning the familiar nurtures a “we do like we’ve always done” attitude towards everyday life. Put another way, we prefer to go through our everyday life with the auto-pilot on. With this on, there is very little reason, need or room to negotiation with our partner. Moving through an everyday life permeated with a number of external circumstances, we tend to see our (gendered) roles as complementary and as expressions of personal interests, competences and personalities.

Flying with the auto-pilot on however can from a gender equality perspective be problematic. A great deal of what couples see as self-evident in everyday life not only reproduces gendered patterns, but also (re)produces gender inequality in couple relationships. As we have shown in this study, “doing gender” and “doing couple” according to traditional gendered understanding of women’s and men’s competence and interests contributes to the reproduction of a gender unequal organization of family life. Therefore, we argue, living in a gender equal way requires that we turn off the auto-pilot, question how our everyday life is organized, and establish new, more gender equal routines and rituals. This however, is not easily accomplished since, as we have shown, couples often experience limited room to manoeuvre within their everyday lives. This makes it difficult for them to see alternative, more gender equal ways of organizing everyday life and to question the gender unequal status quo.

Flying with the auto-pilot on can also be an obstacle to gender equality on a policy level. In Sweden, policies aimed at promoting gender equality rest to a large degree on an underlying assumption that couples can and are willing to negotiate their way to gender equal solutions. An important task for policy has been to even out the playing field for women and men, and to create conditions conducive to negotiation. In general, this has meant strengthening women’s bargaining position within the family and providing women (and men) with “equal power to shape society and their own lives” (Statistics Sweden, 2008, p. 12). Policies have often aimed at creating an equal distribution of power and influence, economic equality and an equal distribution of unpaid care and household work between women and men (Statistics Sweden, 2008). Labor market policies have aimed at increasing women’s economic independence by

ensuring women's right to paid employment, equal pay and more recently, on increasing the representation of women in high-level positions. Policies have also aimed at facilitating for both women and men to combine family life and working life in a gender equal way. Cornerstones in these efforts have been high quality subsidized day care and a parental insurance scheme that provides both parents with the right to paid parental leave.<sup>6</sup> These policies are intended to provide couples, both women and men, with real possibilities to negotiate gender equal sharing of parental leave and paid employment. Statistics show however this is not the case (Statistics Sweden, 2008). Women still have primary responsibility for the domestic sphere, utilize 80% of parental leave and to a higher degree work part-time in order to care for young children. Though some might argue that such gender unequal arrangements are the result of couples' negotiations, our results suggest that they are more likely the result of couples' use of auto-pilot and a consequential lack of negotiation.

This study has some limitations which merit comment. We have used a theoretically more narrow and stringent definition of negotiation than is usual in family research. A relevant question therefore is whether the criteria we use to define negotiation are valid. We are aware that the way we define negotiation entails a risk of missing that which other researchers have found and discussed as negotiation because it falls outside of the scope of our definition. A possible consequence is an under-representation of negotiation in our study that could explain the low level of negotiation we found in relation to other researchers' results.

We are convinced however that these limitations also constitute the major strength of this study. In our opinion there is a need for studies within the sociology of the family that question the tacit assumption that the everyday lives of modern couples are characterized by negotiations. This is not to say that the definition of negotiation used in this article is the most appropriate or fruitful. We therefore encourage researchers to take a critical stance toward the assumption of the negotiating family and to move beyond the vague conceptualization of negotiation that is often found in family research. By taking on the challenge of developing the concept of negotiation,

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.fk.se/sprak/eng/foralder/> for information on the Swedish parental insurance scheme in English.

future research could find answers to such important questions as, under what circumstances does negotiation occur, in what forms can and does negotiation take, which power resources are relevant in couples' negotiations and if not negotiation, then what?

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