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Space of intimacy and the plural reflexivity of the couples

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Abstract

The de-institutionalization of couple's models, the re-composition of gender relations and the change in the balance of power between the partners require motivating the relationship constraint on emotional-affective dimensions (Di Nicola, 2008).

The present study compares three theories to analyse the couple's relationship: the pure relationship (Giddens, 2008), the double compromise model (De Singly, 2006), the relational theory (Donati, 2007), it highlights their difference in the description of the reflexivity dimension.

By the results of a research conducted collecting interviews key informant, directed to young couples partners. It proves on the one hand as reflexivity is a feature common to respondents and individuals in 'intimate space' – a kind of place of *internal conversation* (Archer, 2003), in which it verifies-justifies designs living together, on the other hand it observes its realization in the *modus vivendi* of couples to place them inside one of the three theories.

Keywords: couples, intimate space, morphogenetic process.

1. Introduction: the transformation processes in couples

The reality of couple's relationships is heterogeneous. It is difficult to place them in social structures as much as ecclesial¹ and political² institutions.

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¹ The Catholic Church has dedicated two Synods – in the 2014 and the 2015 – to the topic of the family, later Pope Francis published an apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* that deepens many aspects and contains attentions to the new conditions of emotional bonds (*Amoris Laetitia* Chapter 8).

Their interpretative keys change and their rules are modified to be able to recognize couples. These processes join and lead to a new, and still not completely clear, definition of the couple bond. They are the symptoms of a deinstitutionalized context, of a *liquid love* (Bauman, 2003), that would characterize the placenta in which the relationship between partners is born.

Then there is a second movement that arises from the individual partners who act for the construction of their relationship. For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2008) people do not have models to be inspired by their forms of life and love; they are left alone with their responsibility and self-determination³. Their tie would become constitutionally unstable, because everything depends on the immanent motivations of the individual partners to grow and cure or to abandon the relationship regardless of the common history. For the authors at the same time intimate and exclusive couple's relationship becomes the main relief to modern loneliness. This process of individualization would lead to a narcissistic formula of married life (Cesareo, Vaccarini, 2012): according to this point of view the partners are mirrored to please themselves; each of them looks for his reflection in the eyes of the other.

The blurry institutional models and the amplification of the processes of individualization lead to a pluralisation of the forms of the couple that can be distinguished by a different gradation of the strength of their bond. The least constrained form is recognizable in the 'living apart together'⁴ (Salerno, 2010), in which the partners do not cohabit but they understand themselves in a stable relationship, they lead separate lives in which they live moments in common. Duncan (2015) emphasizes that this formula would allow women greater independence from tasks related to duties of domestic work, but on the other side it emerges a need for a greater sharing, unsatisfied with the shared moments alone.

Then there are the cohabiting couples who do not formalize their union. Piccone Stella and Salmieri underline the naturalness by which it is possible to access at a form of coexistence. As a result, the partners would not formulate *a priori* strategies of their life in common, but would take note of their living

² We find some indicators of change in legislative interventions for *de facto* and homosexual couples: in Italy Cirinnà Law (L. 76/2016) contains rights and obligations for people united by ties of affection and mutual assistance and cohabitants.

³ Autonomy and exclusive personal responsibility are products of the process of individualization that shuts self-referentiality to individuals (Bauman, 1999, Touraine, 2002).

⁴ Levin and Trost introduce the living apart together in the scientific literature (1999). Their purpose is to describe a new form of stable non-cohabiting couple. The Italian research cited, instead, uses the concept to identify non-cohabiting couples who tend to preserve the informal character of their relationship.

conditions. This could explain the fluidity of this condition which often leads to an institutionalization of the relationships; especially for younger couples who would use cohabitation as an open door to different possibilities in their future (Istat, 2016)⁵.

Then there are the couples who formalize their union with the celebration of the marriage. In the *Wedding paradoxes* Carter and Duncan (2017) show how the institutional celebration highlights an important step, it is not exclusively a 'consumerist celebration' for couples. Marriage contains multiple meanings from the planning of a couple looking for the recognition of others, to the recovery of tradition. They write: 'the couple researches to be especially normal not especially unique' (Carter, Duncan 2017: 8).

De-institutionalization leads to an overlap of different forms of the bond within which the relationship develops. To this process is added a second process that involves the partners: the redefinition of gender relations. Two aspects can be indicated. The first highlights the process of female emancipation that requires partners to discuss a new balance in a scenario that starts from the assumption of equality. However, the inconsistencies remain in reality: in practice they demonstrate the different distribution of the weight of housework (Rinaldi, Romano, 2008) or the different behaviour on the availability and management of budgets in the presence of partners with different social conditions (Di Nicola, 2008). They highlight the consequences of an investment in the professional life of women in the event of a relationship breakdown (Todesco, 2009), if the differences in the past were accepted passively, today they are intolerable.

The feminization process requires men to answer for their roles and tasks; it is not just a matter of justifying privileged status of the old social system, but also the failure to perform domestic and care tasks. Furthermore, their function as a male breadwinner is no longer indispensable for the family unit when women enter the labour market. Hochkey, Mahe and Robinson (2007) highlight the engagement to find ways of life between heterosexual couples, especially among young couples. The status quo indicated by tradition for them is not sufficient.

The issue of same-sex couples is part of the debate. There is a second aspect to be pointed out, even if this work does not enter into merit. This is not, at least immediately, an important numerical impact for Italian society as highlighted by Bertocchi and Guizzardi (2017). Yet a new cultural process

⁵ Cases due to ideological choices would not be present. To confirm this hypothesis, a research in the US shows that often socio-economic issues, rather than cultural are hiding behind the choice of cohabitation, in fact marriage requires a stable social status and working which makes it not accessible to all (Cherlin, 2010).

emerges; it affects the way of perceiving a certain type of couple its integration into the community and its own parental network (Guizzardi, 2017). This second emerging aspect will add an additional stimulus in the future for reflection on the identity of heterosexual couples no longer recognized as unique.

A further process is the increased value of the sexual dimension, which becomes more demanding and exclusive for the partners. The body takes centrality in the construction of one's own identity and in relationships with others (Prandini, 2015), because it becomes the interface between a little socialized self and the very 'reified' external world: sexuality and sexual relationship become the interaction between body and psyche and the way of presenting oneself to others. The sexual intercourse may now be the initial moment of a meeting between the partners, a kind of visiting card that anticipates mutual knowledge; if there is no harmony, it is useless to go further. However, the first step affects the couple's relationship because the quality of sexual intercourse will become an indicator of their well-being. If once, in the words of Tomasi da Lampedusa, they included in a conjugal relationship the words: 'I do not do it for my love but to give children to God', today in sexual intimacy they would be almost incomprehensible. The perception of modesty and secrecy changes totally (Simmel, 2005). At the same time, as Eva Illouz (2015) points out, sex is directed towards the sphere of pleasure: it first separates from marriage, then splits up from romantic feelings to go to the play. The institution that now hosts it is the 'consumer market'. This generates anxiety in males and females with respect to the commitment that is put in the relationship and induces doubts to the extent of the possible involvement in the relationship.

2. Three approaches to read the couple relationship

While partners draw new life trajectories, three different approaches can be identified, that capture the traits of the couple relationship. Now we observe the features – that interpret the transformations – and their differences to compare them with the results of a research on the intimate spaces of the couple.

1.1 The couple in the pure relationship

Giddens tells about structuring of a pure relationship⁶ in the ‘transformations of intimacy’, that answers to the fluidity of reflective modernity. Partners shape the couple based on their individual benefits. The link is not binding for them. The aim of the relationship is to keep the subjects in their freedom and therefore independent of each other. This relationship implies the absence of an institutionalized⁷ model, disrupted starting from the remixing of gender roles through ductile sexuality⁸, which develops through the convergent love⁹, which guides the partners in the ‘structuring’ of their relationship during the flow of time of time. The relationship between the partners takes place along the daily practice. It is dissolved and reformulated according to the dis-embedded and re-embedded process, which characterizes the actions of the subjects. The practice directs the choice of resources and rules to be respected. Individuals would be guided by the actualization of the structure: no longer a family in a marriage between a man and a woman, but a link between people, *as long as* I like it or it suits me. The result is an immanent character of the relationship. The legitimization of the relationship by each of the partners is confirmed in the ‘just in time’ recognition of its usefulness, the same sexual exclusivity is important as long as it is desirable or essential for both partners (Giddens, 2008).

So, the pure relationship is shaped *in fieri* and on the basis of equality, because it is based on ductile sexuality, detached from the historical tradition of gender difference, from the structuring of convergent love, which is inspired by a relationship of intimacy: in it develops the dynamics of knowledge between *Ego* and *Alter*. Inside the communication process between the partners we highlight the paradox of a balance that plays between the trust

⁶ The pure relationship is a limiting concept that characterizes the restructuring of private life. It shows a situation in which the social relationship is based on the advantages (Giddens, 2006).

⁷ De-institutionalization is applied in the pure relation to all forms of sexual relations between individuals. The relationship can be linked and dissolved at any time regardless of the time – more or less long – and regardless of the degree of formal institutionalization achieved. It develops itself suspends or changes according to the practical conscience of the subject (Guizzardi, 2005).

⁸ It is the point of arrival of the revolution of gender relations. Female sexual pleasure is a consequence of the possibility of detachment from the reproductive sphere. Two consequences are rooted in society: the affirmation of the autonomy of women that has profound consequences on male sexuality, and a process of emancipation of homosexuality (Giddens, 2006).

⁹ It is a bargaining in the emotional sphere of the partners where each partner discovers a part of himself based on what the other is available to reveal. The relationship of intimacy develops in proportion to the measure of availability for the ‘unveiling’ of the other (Giddens, 2008).

of the unveiling and the vulnerability of having discovered. For Giddens the relationship will encounter limits or find incentives in the degree of openness.

The pure relationship is precarious by definition, because it depends on the continuous evaluation of each partner of individual costs and benefits. Its democratic nature implies that the partner must justify the reasons for its decisions. He/she cannot consider them evident or binding for the other. The pure relationship is also demanding because it requires a deep level of intimacy: Alter's knowledge legitimizes the credibility on which Ego can establish the degree of trust that can be offered. So, the other will also be able to realize his reliability through the recognized and appreciated reputation of a partner. The possibility of accepting authority and responsibility on an equal basis springs from the fiduciary exchange that characterizes the democracy of the couple. In this case the immanent nature of the relationship comes into crisis, because trust is based on the granting of Ego's credit to Alter. This implies an opening to the history of a couple.

Some criticisms can be raised to the pure relationship: Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2008) highlight three paradoxes that stimulate the perception of individual vulnerability in the relationship. The first concerns the 'freedom of the partners' that postulates a continuous autonomy and at the same the systematic renewal, but not granted, choice of the other; the second highlights the 'search for authenticity' which implies the stability of feeling without certainty of the feeling of the partner; the third points out the "action of love" that has an un-rational dimension and is not based exclusively on the cost-benefit *ratio*. These conditions require continuous stress to the partners, because one must evaluate and verify the other and one's relationship, and because one is continuously under examination. Also Magatti (2009) indicates two objections: on the one hand the search for continuous maximization of the benefits of a relationship requires its unrealizable sublimation in ordinary life; on the other hand, the utilitarian matrix of the two-way relationship would lead to a mutual exploitation rather than a democratic sharing.

Therefore the couple in the pure relationship is structured in the daily practice of the two partners. It is in search of greater intimacy, continually in progress, and is calibrated on immanence. Without its history there is no difference between a long-term and a new born couple. Furthermore, the relationship is intense but precarious, since it depends on a just-in-time credibility, always revocable from one or the other. It is characterized by the equity between genders, in which it builds a democratic relationship, where authority is recognized to the partner with greater 'practical' ability in each area or episode. The couple is observed exclusively in its 'private'. It focuses on its internal dynamics. For this approach it is ancillary to consider the existence of an action towards the 'public sphere'. The outside effects of the

relationship, if they existed, would be random, or acted out, by partners for the benefit of internal balances.

1.2 The double compromise model

Françoise de Singly (2006) proposes a reading of the couple relationship through the double compromise: the partners are interested in building their own individual life path and their couple; so they want to preserve their personal identity and their couple identity. The author emphasizes the existence of a common interest, as well as that of two individuals, to mark the difference with the pure relationship. The balance of the couple is preserved on a dual individual needs: enjoy him\her independence and live in lovely friendship¹⁰. *Ego* will be available to start a relationship with *Alter* inside the compromise between two human needs: to defend their identity and live together.

The couple, originating from the compromise of both partners, develops a conjugal ego¹¹, which modifies the personal identity of the individual. An *identity oscillation* occurs in the experience of daily life between the one self and the conjugal self. The individual modifies his behaviour in relation to the context in which he lives. Thus, its identity forms oscillate between family instances and the instances of other social contexts. In this dynamic the question of intimacy emerges as a search for the right distance. The partners will evaluate which spheres will be accessible and which are inaccessible to the other. This sphere is plastic and is shaped according to the relationship between Ego and Alter. The cognitive process of the other develops in this game of concealment and unveiling.

At the same time, no individual can live without taking into account the existence of others, even if his ego is not much 'conjugal'. And vice versa, an individual with a new identity does not always behave the same way, he adapts himself to the situation. Tastes and behaviours, to which one derogates, will not be completely abandoned; the partners will be able to dispose of them at different times.

¹⁰ Men and women want a compromise that can combine the benefits of life in common with those of life alone. They seek a compromise to live with others without major constraints (De Singly, 2008).

¹¹ The conjugal ego opens up a space, not considered by pure relationship, in individual identity. It considers alterity less dependent on immanence, because men and women are not always willing to put their condition back into crisis – highlights de Singly (2008).

The conjugal ego takes shape in a friction socialization¹², which is articulated in the practice of cohabitation, where the partners understand that they are facing another through the experimentation of the routine of the life of two. With friction socialization, the partners act in the awareness that the presence of the other requires a change in attitudes and personal habits.

In this case the partners set themselves the goal of preserving the relationship, as they demonstrate reciprocally in daily practice both Ego's care for Alter and Ego's attention to Alter's activity.

The willingness to accept life together, which requires modifying part of oneself in order to make itself acceptable, is granted on two conditions in the double compromise model. The first requires that the other partner also undertake the same task; the second requires that he/she is recognized in his personality. So a form of recognition is activated.

Common life based on three individual interests for De Singly: *the revelation of self*, because in comparison with the other one discovers himself; the permanent socialization of respect for the other, because life together requires a search for balance between daily personal needs and those of the partner; mutual acceptance of the self, because the life of couples offers an identity confirmation of which an individualized society is lacking. For this reason the intimacy of a couple would be a unique reality, because it would offer the individual the satisfaction of a need that is difficult to find in contemporary society elsewhere.

The couple relationship becomes a support for the identity of the partners: on the one hand it helps them in the exploration of an open self to the other; on the other hand it stimulates the construction of an intimate self that allows one to escape the tyranny of the other. Furthermore, the oscillation of identity grants margins of freedom to the self alone, which concretizes the compromise between the need for individual autonomy and that of companionship. Being able to act as individuals becomes a 'legitimate breathing act'.

The practice of cohabitation plays an important role to cement life in common. It would serve to guarantee affection for the other even in the absence of the continued confirmation of the other. Cohabitation and recognition become ingredients of life together, as they would allow to mark the difference between the friendly bond and the family bond¹³.

¹² It is a process of preparation for young people and adults: it helps them to face the two dimensions of life together. One is feeling and attention to others and their needs; one is the elasticity that allows everyone to belong to a group without cancelling himself.

¹³ The practice of cohabitation would make it possible to soften the stress of continuous verification, not considered in the pure relationship.

In the double compromise model the couple relationship is born as an individual response to a need, and turns into a resource for the construction of identity in an individualized society, because it allows the experience of mutual recognition. The meeting between the partners, guaranteed by cohabitation, would take shape above all through the process of socialization articulated by friction that becomes a laboratory for the construction of the sociality of people, as well as always generating the search for a new balance. A role of mediation between private and public is indirectly recognized in the couple relationship. Life in common produces the ability to consider the interest of others, even if it's different. It allows us to build an identity opened to the transformation, even if temporary, of the self.

1.3 The couple in the relational theory

Relational theory is the third approach to read the couple. In this case the couple is considered in the family dimension. It is a relationship that originates and stands out from every other for the specificity of being between people of different genders and generations. Unlike the other two theories, the relational theory preserves the distinctive character of the family as a peculiar social relation (Donati, 2007), as a place of mediation between internal and external, between public and private, between secret and visible (Prandini, 2006).

Biographical time (past, present and future) also takes on a specific relevance. Prandini (2006) emphasizes three distinctive temporal characteristics for family relationships: *come from*¹⁴ that it allows a memory able to increase the sense of belonging (i.e. the conjugal alliance that places the couple in society or the generative relationship between parents and children); *come with*¹⁵ to underline the reality in the present that enhances being together in the distinction (Prandini highlights that a relationship is possible only between distinct subjects); *come about*¹⁶ to signal the projection towards the future (i.e. the couple's planning or generative capacity).

When we restrict the analysis to the partners and the couple, it is specified that in the sociological field the conjugal relationship can be of different types: marriage, cohabitation, reconstituted family (Donati, 2007). In particular, the couple heterosexual¹⁷ is considered the most complete combination for its quality of being a founding nucleus of the family. Furthermore, an added

¹⁴ Italian word is *pro-venire*, so it is preferred to translate *come from* rather than to originate.

¹⁵ In the same way the Italian word is *con-venire*. *Come with* is preferred to agree.

¹⁶ The Italian word is *ad-venire*, it is preferred *come about* to occur.

¹⁷ In the relational approach we distinguish between heterosexual couples and homosexual couples, unlike the other approaches. The heterosexual couple has a particular value because it offers a complementary and reciprocal polarity between different ones (Donati, 2007).

value is attributed to the marriage institution, because it transmits a public dimension to the relationship (Bertocchi, 2006).

Prandini and Martignani (2009) assert that marriage socializes partners to the understanding of *Homo socius*. It becomes an ‘antibody’ to the *individualistic chaos*. The authors emphasize that marriage becomes today the expression of a choice in which partners generate relational goods through the *consortium conversationis* which structures the couple’s us.

The couple is composed of an inter-subjective dimension, because it consists of a group of vital world that involves individuals with their specificities, and it is composed of a structural dimension, because it forms an institution that generates certain constraints and expectations (Donati, Di Nicola 2003). The couple becomes a relational system that has a reference of meaning (*refero*¹⁸) and a reciprocal link (*religo*¹⁹). The couple relationship is not limited to continuous *falling in love*, unlike the pure relationship. It lives a constructive bond, because a meaningful relationship entails a tie independently of the individual will (Donati, 2012). The couple is a symbolic reference and a structure of expectations, which makes it an independent space. The individual partners interact in it; it becomes a sense community for them.

The central element becomes the relationship; within it the individual life trajectories of the partners take shape. Ego and Alter do not construct their relationship on the everyday routine but in daily practice unlike the structuring theory, as they would have a model, which refers to a bond founded on the reciprocity and dependence constraints between the partners. This feature highlights a further aspect: the partners build their relationship on the symbolic code of love²⁰ and not on the utilitarian code. Love conveys exchange through gratuity and gift. The relationship is recognized in the norm of reciprocity, by which we can continuously reactivate the Ego – Alter interaction process. Furthermore partners feel themselves interdependent: Ego builds trust in Alter and *vice versa*. The couple’s relationship is given a structure that exceeds the harmony of falling in love. It does not focus exclusively on the principle of individual utility²¹.

¹⁸ The report, as *refero*, carries an inter-subjective symbolic reference, which helps both the relationships between the partners and the couple’s relationships with other social subjects (Donati, Di Nicola, 2003).

¹⁹ The relationship, as *religo*, forms a link founded on expectations and responses (Donati, Di Nicola, 2003).

²⁰ The previous theories based the report on continuous falling in love. In the present approach love becomes the dominant logic in the relationship between the partners, it goes beyond the emotional dimension.

²¹ As it happens for the pure relationship, but also in the double compromise model.

Reciprocity and interdependence help and stimulate the rediscovery of the self, which becomes a counterweight to the weakening of functional dependencies (economic and material). These elements do not disappear, but they influence the couples much less than in the past. Instead, the emotional and psychological dependencies increase, that the co-dependency marks a different attitude than the redistribution of tasks and to the balance of powers in the pair²².

The relationship between the partners is therefore based on the 'norm' of a recognition of the reciprocity and dependence of Ego by Alter and *vice versa*, since it points to complementarity in addition to affection and sexual harmony. Thus the distinctive character of the relationship becomes the continuous search for reciprocity (Donati, Di Nicola, 2003).

The processes of change are read within a process of social morphogenesis²³ in the relational approach. These transformations affect both partners and their link. Changes in the structure and social practices of households and their components would be the result of two concomitant processes: one highlights their exposure to external, cultural and social factors, which affect the customs and practices of doing and being a family; the other process is related to self-organization of the core itself to face social challenges. The characteristic of the contemporary couple is in the continuous change of its shape (morphogenetic process); the engagement needs to build a plural us based on responsible freedom of Ego and Alter (Donati, 2012). Partners enter a reflexivity social relationship: they recognize themselves as a couple, they enter a planning dimension and interweave ties with their respective social worlds. The 'family' process is realized through a cognitive, emotional, and normative conversation between the members. The peculiar style, in which daily relations are expressed in a specific family, shows its *mudus vivendi*, its subjectivity (Prandini 2006).

At last, a process of mirroring²⁴ is triggered between Ego and Alter. This process focuses on the performance that an actor creates in relation to the emotional attachments and emotional needs of the other, no longer on the expectations of roles already written²⁵. A reflexive process is also identified in

²² Another difference emerges with the previous approaches. In those the independence and the search for autonomy legitimize the equality between the partners, instead in this approach it is the dependence among the partners to found the equality between the genders.

²³ Explaining Donati and Di Nicola (2003), unlike in the past, the flows of transformational processes have no definite models: family roles and status are less determinable and at the same time the experiential dynamics are very varied. They affect expectations and practices.

²⁴ The mirroring process has similarities with the socialization by friction described by de Singly.

²⁵ In this game, individual autonomy becomes a function of satisfying the need for dependence (Di Nicola, 2008).

the mirroring activity because it refers to a transformation of the partner. It is a new rediscovery of self, of the other and of the relationship with effects on the possibilities of acceptance or rejection of the consequences arising.

3. Identify the space of intimacy in the diversity of approaches

The three illustrated approaches catch the reflective dimension for a couple's partners. However, there are considerable differences in the ways in which the reflexive process takes shape.

In the pure relation the founding principle is utilitarian. The two partners tighten a bond as long as it is useful and enjoyable. The couple recognizes itself only inside it. Reflexivity, then, involves the single partner, who verifies the state of the art of his relationship; she/he assesses how much the couple's life enriches her/him and if this is still a possible experience; moreover, the verification of the relationship is played on the present, therefore the memory of the lived together is not binding.

The second approach involves the couple reflexivity, even if the founding principle remains utilitarian: living together is the answer to a personal need. The two partners change habits and behaviours to go to the other's needs especially in a process of socialization by friction. At the same time, these changes are not definitive; the identity oscillation leads the partners to equip themselves with a double mask: one is worn when attending 'single' environments; the other is worn when one lives together. The qualifying characteristic of this kind of reflexivity is narcissism – as Cesareo e Vaccarini (2012) suggest. The important thing is to feel good together, the social space of the couple does not interest; the aim is to be sufficient for the couple, in the couple.

In the third approach the founding principle is reciprocity. The reflexivity takes on the character of acknowledgement. The two partners see in 'the other' a subject that helps in personal growth. Within this process of emotional, rational, sensual conversation, the couple becomes aware of their social space, in which the partners confront themselves and move together; the life spent together becomes a memory by which confront each other.

Starting from this assumption, the results of a couple research²⁶ are analyzed to see how theories meet reality. Semi-structured interviews were

²⁶ The research carried out in the context of a survey on the balance in the relationship between the partners and management of life and work times, collects 20 interviews that have the aim of detecting the menagé of the couple. The choice of young couples – between 3 and 6 years of coexistence – to focus attention on the people who live in a more intense way the processes of change described previously.

addressed to 20 young couples residing in Rome (Table 1). They form a non probability sample made to detect their lifestyles. The couples were identified through a snowball sampling; once the first three subjects were identified, then they indicated others at the end of their interview. It aims to verify the hypothesis of the realization of plural reflexivity starting from the space of intimacy that the couples build.

All the couples interviewed are heterosexual; we tried to border the age difference between the partners and to differentiate the degree of study, even if – except for two cases – all the partners are placed towards a medium-high level of education²⁷. The couples have an average economic status: 6 couples are one earner; 16 live in a house owned and face the costs to repay the mortgage loan, the others live in a rented apartment.

The interviews are directed to both partners and carried out in two stages (first together and then separated). The goal is to explore some dimensions in the daily *ménage*. The methods of communication; the decision-making process and the balance between support and internal conflict, the space of intimacy, the prospects for the future.

In the reading of the results the guiding hypothesis aims to observe whether the couples fall into one of the three approaches and in which of the three. Therefore, they allow us to identify which couples favour individual independence, the well-being of the couple and the autonomy of the individual or the reflective social relationship. For this reason, after detecting the reflexivity dimension of couples, the analysis focuses on three indicators: *how the pronoun us is used*, to understand the attention of the partners to the common life; *presence or absence of a future prospect for the couple*, to identify its immanent or historical character; to highlight the more or less marked *distinction between common and individual living*. The three indicators show how the partners realize, imagine and think about their relationship in everyday life.

²⁷ This did not allow us to verify whether the reflective dimension of partners and couples is influenced by the level of education achieved.

TABLE 1. Characteristic of the sample.

Couple	Civil status	Years of cohabitation	Children	Partner gender	Age of partner	Partner level of education
1	Not married	3	Not	M	31	Eighth grade diploma
				F	33	Higher diploma
2	Married	6	Yes	F	33	Higher diploma
				M	38	Higher diploma
3	Married	6	Yes	M	38	Degree
				F	38	Degree
4	Not married	3	Yes	F	30	Degree
				M	37	Degree
5	Married	6	Yes	M	31	Higher diploma
				F	31	Higher diploma
6	Married	5	Yes	M	33	Degree
				F	28	Degree
7	Married	4	Yes	M	32	Higher diploma
				F	33	Higher diploma
8	Not married	4	Yes	M	40	Degree
				F	39	Degree
9	Not married	3	Not	M	35	Degree
				F	31	Degree
10	Married	5	Not	F	36	Degree
				F	34	Degree
11	Married	3	Yes	M	30	Degree
				F	30	PHD
12	Married	4	Yes	M	31	Higher diploma
				F	33	PHD
13	Not married	3	Not	F	29	Degree
				M	30	Degree
14	Married	5	Yes	F	35	Higher diploma
				M	35	Higher diploma
15	Not married	6	Nto	M	29	PHD
				F	29	Degree
16	Not married	4	Yes	F	40	Degree
				M	41	Higher diploma
17	Married	3	Yes	F	33	Degree
				M	38	Degree
18	Not married	3	Not	F	29	Degree
				M	31	Higher diploma
19	Married	4	Yes	F	29	Degree
				M	29	Higher diploma
20	Not married	6	Yes	F	41	Eighth grade diploma
				M	41	Eighth grade diploma

4. Reflexivity in couples

The partners interviewed show an attention to the creation of a space of intimacy in which we can identify the reflective dimension of the couple. In interviews it is observed in three moments: when dealing with the theme of communication in the couple; when asked if there are reserved moments in which the partners isolate themselves from the routine; when facing frictional moments and quarrels.

Communication is a continuous flow between the partners. There are not only the moments when the couple is together, there are also times when the two send messages on different platforms from Whatsapp to Messenger, to traditional SMS. An answer illustrates the communicative continuity in an exemplary way:

He: You wake up together, have breakfast. Then you have this time frame of working hours, that you say: okay! You do not feel. See you again in the afternoon or evening. On the contrary, no! We also feel during this time frame, at least two or three times, when it goes wrong. Maybe even some text messaging, some chat exchange. (Couple 18)²⁸.

On these occasions there are some fixed appointments: to receive a phone call once one partner got to work or got to lunchtime. These attitudes act as reinforcement between partners who show their attention to each other. The need to feel accepted and recognized by others is confirmed by seeking continuity. Both could be understood both from a utilitarian perspective and from reciprocity.

Another dimension found in the interviews is the space of intimacy. It is the attention to keep moments of privacy, where the partners are 'alone-together'²⁹. They can be the most varied: 'smoke a half cigarette on the balcony' (Couple, 6), 'the dance school' (Couple 8), 'Go shopping together' (Couple 8), 'escape for a journey' (Couple 2); and also 'the evening moment' (Couple 9), 'during dinner' (Couple 11 or 13), in bed before sleep 'when we can stay awake' (Couple 5 or 19). This time is experienced as an escape from everyday life or as an opportunity for checking some problematic issues of the relationship.

²⁸ The research took place in Italian, so the passages of the interviews reported are translated into English by the author.

²⁹ It would have been useful to also observe the expression of sexuality in the couple, unfortunately we have not been able to deepen the topic, if not in rare cases, too small to be able to draw useful indications. However, it is believed that the results collected can offer a sufficient representation of the space of intimacy, even if not exhaustive.

The space of intimacy introduces a meditation on the couple's self. It is an important moment for all the partners interviewed, who try to preserve them through the search for precise deadlines, even in situations where the daily routine offers severe rhythms.

A reflective dimension of the couple is intercepted in the space of intimacy. This is an environment that allows to update the way of being, to verify the common path, to criticize in a positive or negative way: feel good together.

Another dimension is observed in the ability of the partners to identify support and face conflicts in the couple. In everyday life disputes or misunderstandings are communicated also in particular gestures: it emerges from the words of an interviewed:

She: We've always talked a lot and if there were any problems, and well! You understood immediately because he didn't speak anymore (Smile). In the past we wrote a lot, now much less. But of course there are also the movements of the body. I know that when I'm nervous. He also understands it by simply looking at me, even simply by the strength with which I place one thing on the table (Couple 6).

The difficulty in explaining problems or emotions among the partners emerges in ordinary communication, in particular the fear of being misunderstood is highlighted:

He: Maybe the reason why I get angry is the difficulty of saying something when it is discussed, the difficulty of transmitting, of giving a message and not being able to give that kind of message (Couple 4).

Being misunderstood is one of the major causes of quarrel, most likely, because the partner has strong expectations of harmony in the other.

The dimensions examined show us that life in common 'under the same roof' produces a first 'shot' in the couple relationship, linked to the constant presence of the other in the daily routine. It opens up a space of special intimacy that involves reflexivity. Now we need to see what kind of reflexivity is set in motion.

To check how we can place couples in different reflexive approaches, we compare three different indicators.

Using the *pronoun we* offer some indications to emphasize the attention to the common dimension. The pronoun appears in interviews to underline the absence of problems: 'Among us there are none' as the couple 20 says³⁰; then

³⁰ Similar statements appear in the interviews of couples 1, 7, 15.

'the us' is used to show the harmony in the search for common experiences: for example a journey together³¹. In a more intense way, 'we' appears in interviews when they talk about the child³², or to underline the search for moments of intimacy³³. We still find 'ourselves', when we describe the prospects for the future, and when dramatic moments have been faced (the death of a person³⁴), when we remember some choices or some events that have characterized the story of a couple: marriage (Couple 11) or to expect a child a child³⁵.

The decisional processes in the dynamics of the couples interviewed focus on two poles: *sharing* (Couple 4) or conciliation (Couple 11). Conciliation means a more or less tacit agreement on some types of decisions: the search for conciliation emerges among the partners who found themselves choosing life changes; how an interviewer explains:

She: As far as her choices are concerned, I have always supported her ... I followed her because it is right for everyone to respect their ideas. My choices he has always supported them (Couple 5).

In other cases, the conciliatory attitude emerges among the partners when they let themselves be guided by the other (Couple 16) to cultivate a cultural interest or to choose a place to visit.

The search for sharing emerges first of all in the care of the children; then there is cooperation when we are called to make decisions outside the relationship: to engage in volunteering (Couple 12) or to support the choice of the change of work activity (Couple 15). To understand what these interviewees mean by sharing, it is interesting to observe their answers to the question: 'When does he/she care his/her partner?' They declare that the partner supports the other in everyday life: because it is a 'point of reference' (Couple 12), because it is important to 'share one another' (Couple 13), and to 'support oneself in weaknesses' (Couple 9).

Finally there are three couples who claim to follow the course of events; for them the cohabitation was 'natural'³⁶: the event happened progressively, the partners were constantly living in the same apartment until one of them decided to leave his previous home. To confirm the informal character of these couples it can be observed that none of the three is married.

³¹ Couples 13, 16, 8, 10, 12.

³² Couples 14, 16, 11, 6, 17, 7.

³³ All couples when they talk about their spaces of intimacy in the interview use us.

³⁴ Couples 19 and 2.

³⁵ Couples 14, 2, 8, 4.

³⁶ Couples 1, 18, 20

The third indicator shows the projection towards the future of the couples involved in the research. 'How do you imagine your couple in 5 years?' Is a question asked separately to the two partners. The answers collected, on the one hand confirm the harmony between the partners, because both have faced similar topics in all the cases achieved; on the other side, the answers make it possible to group them into three groups.

The first group consists of 8 couples³⁷ who do not articulate a vision of the future together: the expectation is to continue 'as now keeping the harmony': for example, the couple 3 says it; the focus is on professional careers and feeling good together as seen from the partners' answers of the couple 13:

He: Think about how to be satisfied at work. We are both concentrated on it because, having a job, it's quite new to us.

She: For now I'm focused on work. Our couple ultimately relies heavily on the fact that we have fun together; this is fundamental in my opinion.

Couples in this group express satisfaction with the quality of their relationship, but they do not ask questions about their future. They are mainly focused on the present and their objectives are defined by individual projects.

The second group consists of only 5 couples³⁸. That differs from the previous group not so much for the partners' ability to describe their vision of the couple's future, but for their aspiration to improve the current common condition. Some hope to have other children: 'become a father', 'become a mother'³⁹, others to be less busy at work to have more time to live together⁴⁰. These couples also express satisfaction with the quality of their relationship. But their goals are not exclusively individual, they involve the couple.

The third group contains the remaining 7 couples⁴¹. In this case, however, the imagination of the future foresees the change towards a project: 'building a common path' as the partner of the couple 10 supports, or engaging in voluntary activities as others⁴² point out. Also in this group expresses the desire to have children: but the expressions are 'building a family' or 'becoming parents' as the couple says 10. Both phrases indicate a conjugal vision of parenting. In some cases, a religious foundation of reference emerges, as shown in the reply of the couple's partner 12:

³⁷ The couples are 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 13, 18, 20.

³⁸ The couples are 5, 6, 9, 15, 16.

³⁹ Couples 6, 9, 16.

⁴⁰ Couples 5 and 15.

⁴¹ The couples are 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 17, 19.

⁴² Couples 10, 11, 14.

He: I hope that in the future there will be the same serenity that exists today. And I say not because we will be good, but I hope that the God will continue to give a help to give, as he has done until today. In short, that He gives us the strength to always compare ourselves, because if it were to depend on our being good, we could hardly manage to get anywhere.

The common vision is also linked to the value of the institution of marriage, as emerges from his wife:

She: In the future we will be like now, probably more mature as a husband and wife. The greater maturity will be linked to the responsibilities that we are called to face.

These couples also show an attention to the changes that will be able to intervene in the proximity network as seen in the interview with the couple partner 14:

He: we will be a couple that continues to grow and will have to face different problems that we do not have now. What can come to my mind is the fact that our parents will always be older and surely, sooner or later, we will have to face a speech: return what they are doing for us.

The hope and the commitment emerge among the responses of the respondents of this group so that the partner finds a professional realization that has not yet completed: 'in our future I hope my wife has succeeded in the enterprise of becoming a full-time teacher' (husband, couple 19).

Finally this group tends to imagine a common future in the couple as well as for the individual partners.

5. Conclusion: the space of intimacy and the reflexivity of a couple

The space of intimacy and the daily conversation become environments that regulate the couple and allow it to face the transformations. Within this space of intimacy we can affirm that the relationship of the couple becomes a community of meaning and responds to some needs-wishes of the partners. In each interviewed couple a reflective dimension is intercepted in the partners' effort to look for moments, in which to reflect 'in and of' their relationship. They develop an intimate conversation that recalls the 'inner conversation' (Archer, 2003). It is observed that the reflection on the couple's self generates a *modus vivendi* although for each one it happens with different

modalities and times. The specific conversation characterizes the concrete relationship of the partners in its uniqueness. Within that space, in fact, the daily practice of common life is structured, conflicts between the partners are confronted and support is given to tackle issues for their social life.

But the *modus vivendi* are not the same. The different approaches described can lead to their interpretation.

We can identify three distinct groups of couples from the third indicator examined. The temporal dimension is observed through the attitude towards the future. Within the three groups identified we can observe how the other two indicators are placed.

It is easy to intercept a first group focused on the present. The partners, whom we meet, are more careful to the development of individual paths; their couple relationship: 'That's okay'. So prospects for changes are not found, except for changes due to individuals, probably. The group approaches the category of immanence expressed in the pure relation. These couples use the pronoun *us* to manifest the search for harmony together or the search for experiences to try. Among them there are also partners who allow themselves to be 'lead by events'. We could define them as *couples of immanent lightness*.

In the second group an individual approach remains, but the partners put forward a perspective of the future with the formulation of some needs/desires to 'feel better together'. In this case we approach the double compromise model. This is also confirmed by the prevalence of the conciliatory attitude in the decision-making processes among the interviewed partners. This underlines their affinity with the identity oscillation between the ego alone and the conjugal ego. At the same time among these couples the use of *us* is very present in the description of the spaces of intimacy that highlights the answer to the need to 'feel good together'. We could define them as *couples of self-centred wellbeing*.

Couples from the third group activate an imagination of the future that is opened to the acknowledgment dimension. The couple is considered a subject within a system of relationships and project actions that overcome it. This third group is better understood by the relational theory. Among these couples we find those who use *us* when they tell their story and remember special events (happy or tragic). Then there is a large number of couples among those who adopt an attitude of sharing choices. Finally, a constant attention to the partner occurs between the partners and there is a tension to open the couple outwards. We could define them as *couples of acknowledgment in reciprocity*.

The analysis shows that in a space of intimacy a 'inner conversation' of a couple develops. In it, different reflexive modes are developed that lead to

completely various dynamics in the two-way relationship. These will characterize the balance in the relationship between the partners.

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