

# CONJUGAL LOVE FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: THEORIZING FROM OBSERVED PRACTICES.

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*Abstract.* This paper presents a sociological reflection on contemporary conjugal love, both from an empirical and a theoretical point of view. Drawing on analyses of data regarding financial arrangements between partners forming a couple, as well as on the sociological literature concerning love relationships, we present a theorization of contemporary conjugal semantics. We define these semantics as consisting of eight “meaning rules” through which social actors respond to the challenges of intimate relationships. Our analysis shows us the gaps and the tensions between different logics of love, on the one hand, and logics of love and social realities, on the other. However, partners’ utterances feature an integration of elements stemming from opposed semantic frameworks; meaning rules fostering mythical idealisation are combined with rules regarding relationship work, therapeutic communication, and the entrepreneurial management of the relationship. This empirical analysis also allows us to tackle a double confusion in the contemporary sociological literature on love and couples.

**Keywords:** Love; marriage relationships; semantics; sociology; practices.

*Résumé.* Cet article propose une réflexion sociologique sur l’amour conjugal contemporain d’un point de vue théorique et empirique. À partir de données recueillies sur les arrangements financiers de personnes vivant en couple et de la littérature sociologique sur l’amour, les auteurs dégagent une sémantique de la conjugalité contemporaine illustrée par huit « règles de sens », mobilisées par les acteurs pour répondre aux défis des relations intimes. L’analyse permet d’observer les décalages entre différentes logiques amoureuses d’une part, et de l’autre entre les logiques de l’amour et les réalités sociales. Les propos des conjoints révèlent l’intégration d’éléments qui tiennent de logiques divergentes dans un même univers de sens : des règles de sens favorisant l’idéalisation mythique conjuguées à celles organisées autour des images du travail sur la relation, de la communication thérapeutique et de la prise en charge entrepreneuriale de

la relation. Cette analyse empirique conduit les auteures à cerner une double confusion dans la littérature contemporaine sur l'amour et les couples.

**Mots clés:** Amour ; relations conjugales ; sémantique ; sociologie ; pratiques

## INTRODUCTION

Sociological literature on love in Western societies has investigated the love imaginaries governing the experiences and behavior of partners in intimate relationships. This article extends this line of inquiry by defining the dominant semantics of love in contemporary Western societies. It aims at tackling the main semantic patterns on the basis of which partners construct a stable long-term heterosexual conjugality, be it marriage or an equivalent reciprocal commitment, through their practices, thoughts, and utterances. “Semantics” refers to an organized, structured, and historically constituted repertoire of meaning rules (Luhmann 1997, 1982). Social actors are not necessarily aware of the meaning rules they themselves employ, which may remain implicit (sometimes even for sociologists; see Jackson 1993), often embedded in stories or proverbs. These meaning rules are rather an abstraction formulated by scholars, firstly through observation of regularities in people’s discourse and behavior, and then on the basis of socially available representations of intimacy (for instance, in media and cultural productions).

In addition to this first level of theorization, our analysis allows us to observe discrepancies between opposite or contradictory meaning rules, on the one hand, and between love meaning rules and social realities (such as high divorce rates, serial monogamy, gender inequalities in the division of labor and separations) on the other.

Our interviews with couples document the coexistence and even the integration of meaning rules stemming from mythical idealization of love with meaning rules stemming from an entrepreneurial conception of love relationships. Partners can act and speak as though their love were endless, putting an emphasis on the idea of destiny (as opposed to the idea of choice) in selecting their partner, and feel compelled to act selflessly in their conjugal interaction. However, at the same time, partners can combine this traditional conception of love with a more modern injunction to relationship work, rational choice action, communication as therapy, and so on. Seemingly contradictory logics contribute jointly to the effort of stabilizing an intimate relationship. The earmarking of money within couples reveals the tensions between different semantic references. More

specifically, our observations show that the traditional semantics of romantic love are sometimes mobilized to motivate and justify actions that deviate from an economic model of rationality.

We have analyzed interview data collected from heterosexual couples in Quebec. Participants were asked questions concerning the arrangements and practices through which they managed their partnerships, including financial arrangements. Individual interviews were carried out across the course of four research projects conducted in Quebec between 2005 and 2012. These projects produced 160 qualitative interviews, averaging 2 hours. Every interview featured a series of open questions concerning the economic arrangements between spouses and participants' expectations and attitudes towards marital life. Through a variety of techniques (word of mouth, community organizations, etc.) 20 interviewers (17 women and 3 men) recruited a group of participants aged between 22 and 62 years, each of whom was living as a couple. Interviews were held mainly in large urban centers (Montreal, Quebec City, Trois-Rivières) and suburbs, but also in more rural areas of Quebec (Montérégie, Laurentides, Lanaudière, and Bas-St-Laurent).

In order to provide different perspectives on intimate relationships and practical arrangements, the following variables were taken into account in the four research projects sex; marital status (half of the participants consulted were married spouses, while the other half were *de facto* partners); parental status (with or without children); socio-economic status through education (secondary, college and university diploma); and sometimes place of residence. Spouses in *de facto* unions were required to have three years of cohabitation or to have a child to compare couples with a similar life path (Villeneuve-Gokalp 1990). With about 30 of the couples, both spouses were interviewed separately. However, no couple interview was carried out. All interviews were transcribed and coded in their entirety.

The secondary analysis that we present in this paper has a number of limitations. For instance, since the sample only includes individuals living in a couple, the point of view of individuals who are not living in a relationship is not represented in our analysis. With the exception of gender, the different variables taken into account in the sample (age, education, parental status, etc.) did not allow differences to emerge during analysis. This is likely another limitation of our study.

We will begin with a definition of the semantics of love, and then move to a discussion of the existing sociological literature. We will then present the eight "meaning rules" that have emerged from our data. Drawing on our analyses, we will conclude by discussing

some confusions prevalent in the scholarly literature which can be dispelled by performing empirical research.

### LOVE SEMANTICS

Love semantics is a structured set of meaning rules. These rules form a coherent repertoire of symbols, images and narratives that define places, moments, identities, roles, discourses, and behaviors related to love (for instance, paying the bill at a restaurant, looking one's partner in the eyes, holding a partner's hand, kissing on the mouth, "self-sacrificing," writing a love letter, moving in together, etc.). This repertoire is historically constituted and is subject to historical change. A system of meaningful connections between semantic elements is partially crystallized by repetition and organized in meaning rules that allow us to identify and experience "love" (Luhmann 1997: 76). At the same time, this system of interpretation is constantly evolving as a result of discourses and social practices and, more specifically, of mediated communication. Love semantics is socially transmitted mainly through different cultural products (proverbs, sayings, stories, novels, TV shows, movies, paintings, etc.) and mass media (Luhmann 1982; Evans 2003; Reinhardt-Becker 2015; Raghu 2015). The meaning rules that structure love semantics preselect the range of possible (contextual) interpretations of a gesture, expression, word, or utterance in a given situation. Hence, these rules define and stabilize legitimate expectations with regard to the behavior of oneself and others. By operating on a shared and generalized basis, these rules allow mutual understanding within interactions, which in turn facilitates the constitution of relationships. Moreover, as we will show, these meaning rules refer to each other, forming a consistent repertoire.

We have identified eight meaning rules that operate in long-term conjugality (as opposed to ephemeral relationships or to "falling in love"): 1) the fiction of duration; 2) love as destiny, or the involuntary nature of love; 3) love as work, or the ongoing investment in the relationship; 4) the imperative of communication; 5) self-sacrifice and disinterest; 6) delayed reciprocity; 7) trust and 8) fidelity. Organized around these rules, love semantics function as a repertoire of generalized and socially accessible "scripts" (Simon and Gagnon 2002), which are adapted and recreated by actors in concrete intimate situations, i.e. when "love" is the case. By using love semantics, people weave the fabric of their own "love stories" (Averill and Boothroyd 1977, Jackson 2003, Kauffman 2002). The indeterminate temporality

and the exemplary character of semantic elements, which are drawn from stories, proverbs, tales, novels, and traditional metaphors, makes them immediately available for a paradigmatic use (Ricoeur 1984); these elements function as meaning rules that direct actors in interpreting the situations of ordinary life, in their reactions to these situations, and in the organization of their legitimate expectations with respect to others' behavior.

Luhmann (1982) and other scholars (Tyrell 1987; Rougemont 1972) have reconstructed the historical evolution of Western love semantics and its different stages, ranging from love as passion (16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century) to romantic love (18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century) and love as partnership (20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century). At different stages of this semantic evolution, different themes emerge which replace those that dominated the previous stage. However, these themes are not necessarily new and original, rather are often a reorganization of already existing topics. For example, the idea of love as destiny, and the corresponding understanding of love as involuntary were already present in Plato's dialogues, and were further developed by courtly and passionate love. This theme also appears in more modern forms of intimate and conjugal relationships, which are hinged on partnership semantics.

The evolution of love semantics follows a different temporality from societal evolution; for this reason, love semantics can test innovations that are not yet integrated into practices and social structures. They can also preserve old-fashioned, traditional ideas and concepts, thus "hiding" social change (Luhmann 1993: 7). For example, despite the fact that all respondents are aware of the high rate of break-ups and separations, the fiction of duration still is a fundamental meaning rule. Such rule contributes to «hide» this social reality and leads partners to disregard the possibility of divorce or separation. Another example concerns egalitarian norms characterizing discourses and practices of contemporary couples. Although spouses tend to endorse equality, the meaning rule of "self-sacrifice and disinterest" discourages spouses to address inequalities even when they are aware of them (Coontz 2016). In addition, this meaning rule leads partners to take for granted that their spouse will not prioritize his or her interests over the partner's (Henchoz 2014: 32). Therefore, love semantics must not be confused with detailed descriptions of the reality of practices and discourses. The relative absence of an empirical basis in some sociological theories of intimate life, including for example Giddens' (1992), results in confusion when such theories appear to describe *practices* despite describing only the dominant *imaginaries* of love (Jamieson 1999 ; Piazzesi 2014). To avoid this difficulty, our theorization instead begins with a

consideration of an empirical data set, and carefully generalizes the emerging discursive and practical patterns, organizing them on the basis of the above-mentioned meaning rules.

### CONTEMPORARY LOVE SEMANTICS OF LOVE WITHIN A CONJUGAL CONTEXT

It is possible to identify three main stances (van Hoof 2013) in the sociological literature depicting romantic imaginaries in contemporary Western societies. The first stance is the thesis that equates detraditionalization with emancipation. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001, 1995), a progressive liberation from traditional normative references has “individualized” love; today, the individuals composing couples and families are able to negotiate their own normative references. As an effect of this negotiability, normative references are increasingly more changeable, customizable, and temporary. In *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), Giddens argues that the romantic love pattern has been replaced by a “pure relationship,” in which two independent and equal partners engage in a relationship for as long as it contributes to the personal self-fulfillment of each. The popularity of Giddens’s thesis in the scientific literature can be attributed to the fact that it seems to reflect the modern normative ideal (Piazzesi 2014), as well as cohering with the theoretical positions of sociologists who describe contemporary societies as “liquid” (Bauman 2004). The “disappearance” (Théry 1993) or “deinstitutionalization” (Cherlin 2004, Coontz 2005) of marriage has been accompanied by a multiplication of socially acceptable forms of conjugality. This diversification seems to corroborate Giddens’ (1992) and Bauman’s (2004) thesis concerning the de-solidification of intimate ties. Other phenomena such as polyamory and forms of non-conjugal or more ephemeral relationships<sup>1</sup> appear to point in the same direction.

The second stance, which is fundamentally consistent with the first, depicts modernization as the dissolution of bonds and forms of reciprocal commitment that once made love possible and compatible with conjugality. “Colonized” (Musiał 2013) by the logic of economic rationality, by neoliberal capitalism (Illouz 1997, 2012), and by consumer culture, love has lost the durability of its connective power and increasingly expresses itself only in ephemeral and fragile relationships. Adherents to this stance interpret the regression of conjugal institutions

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1. On the boundaries of monogamy, see Frank and DeLamater (2010).

and lasting intimate bonds as the “end of love” (Hillenkamp 2009). The dominant intimate semantics, which are still mainly romantic, are considered to be fatally “corrupted” by neoliberal consumer culture and individualization.

While theoretically interesting, few of the works elaborating this stance are based on empirical evidence. Advocates of a thirds stance, who are represented in a variety of disciplines, have criticized theorists adhering to the first two stances for failing to take into account the inertial force exerted by persistent traditional values, roles, and patterns of intimacy. Additionally, theorists of modernization have not adequately taken into account factors which continue to reduce “freedom” and hinder equality, such as material limitations, the duties and responsibilities of spouses, and the presence of children (Cherlin 2004; Jamieson 1999). Like other researchers such as Roussel (1989), Gross (2005), Cherlin (2004), Popenoe and Whitehead (2001), and on the basis of our empirical studies, we observe a persistence of normative elements in contemporary Western love semantics. Despite the diversification of socially accepted intimate ties and the presence of more and less “serious” commitments in a life course, traditional normative references continue to linger (Giraud 2017). Notwithstanding current and past transformations, the traditional love imaginary still plays a major role in Western social relations and intimate bonds. Traditional semantics are transmitted by literature, movies, TV shows, and more generally by mass media (Dowd and Pallotta 2000, Hefner and Wilson 2013, Reinhardt-Becker 2015). They are also endorsed by counselors and specialists (religious and spiritual guides, therapists, psychologists, sexologists, journalists, etc.) who inform the members of a society of the rights, responsibilities and, more generally, the principles and expectations that should guide them (Jackson 2014, Blais *et al.*, 2014). Despite the increasing diversification and precarity of social ties, some semantic patterns nevertheless remain central, combining with more modern entrepreneurial and therapeutic patterns (Jonas 2007), and with different forms of romantic idealization.

### **LOVE AND ITS “MEANING RULES”**

In this section, we document and discuss the coexistence of traditional and non-traditional patterns in contemporary Western love semantics. In this discussion, we present the eight main “meaning rules” that have emerged from our data, additionally highlighting the tensions between imaginaries of romantic and modern love.

### 1. *The fiction of duration*

Despite the fact that the frequency of break-ups, separation and divorce constantly reminds us of the fragility of intimate bonds, contemporary couples still think and act *as if* their love relationship were endless. The fiction of duration still is a fundamental meaning rule that orients behaviors and interpretations related to love. As long as this fiction does not conflict with empirical evidence and reality tests, the relationship is considered to be stable and everlasting. This meaning rule represents the legacy of a long discursive tradition, according to which love's authenticity is to be assessed on the basis of its ability to last; in this tradition, the stability of true love cannot be shaken by individual, temporal, or social change (Luhmann 1982).

The fiction of duration creates a blind spot in the couple relationship, which leads to a form of obliviousness observed in discourses as well as in conjugal practices (Baker and Emery 1993, Bowman 2010, Williams 2009); very few spouses anticipate the effects, problems and difficulties that arise in the event of a break-up. Drawing on our research as well as other scholars' on the way couples manage money, we claim that this rule of meaning, combined with others (delayed reciprocity, self-sacrifice and disinterest, trust), sometimes limits individual demands, but also legal and financial «negotiations» between spouses. Several scholars have highlighted conflicting attitudes within couples, that often go unaddressed by the partners. Also, research has shown important gaps between egalitarian claims and more traditional practices and arrangements, as well as the effects of such gaps (Jamieson et al, 2002; Nyman, 1999; Pahl, 2005). The difficulty of questioning the fiction of duration can be explained by the synergy between this meaning rule and a double psychological bias. The first bias, the "above average effect," leads one to consider oneself less likely than most people to experience a negative event, be it an accident, an illness, a divorce, or a separation (Gigerenzer 1991, Higgins *et al.* 1997, Rachlinski 2003). The second, the "optimism" bias, plays a central role in the process of building a conjugal life. This bias works as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Armor and Taylor 1998, Reece 2015, Sharot 2012); partners are disproportionately optimistic about the prospects of their relationship, and feel protected from a possible break-up. As a result of this bias, they incessantly invest in their relationships, which in turn solidifies the relationship itself. Conversely, anticipating the end of a relationship makes partners more likely to disengage, and can accelerate a break-up. Optimism bias is also observed when partners are *led* to imagine the possibility

of a breakup; many remain convinced that their love will be strong enough to ensure an amicable and mature separation process (Belleau, 2011). The quality of their current relationship, the number of years they have spent together, and their mutual trust are taken as evidence that partners would conduct their separation amicably. This attitude is illustrated very well by the utterance of a participant who contended that “I would do it in the fairest and most generous way possible if we ever separate, because it’s still someone I love, that I respect, with whom I wanted to have children [...] I think it would be an amicable agreement anyway” (Jacques, male participant, *de facto* union).

The fiction of duration is also observed in partners’ disinclination to make concrete legal or financial arrangements to deal with the material consequences of a break-up; most partners actually behave as if their relationship will last forever.

## 2. *Love as destiny, or the involuntary nature of love*

This meaning rule states that love does not depend on a conscious decision or on rational action (Chaumier 1999, Henchoz 2008). That we “fall in love” as we have an accident is highlighted by the images and metaphors frequently used to narrate the beginnings of romantic relationships (Lemieux 2003, Schurmans and Dominicé 1997): “destiny,” “love at first sight,” “chance,” “*coup de foudre*,” and even “soul mate” suggest that a loved one is not chosen, but rather that he or she was destined for us, as the only one possible<sup>2</sup> (Bergström 2013, Bozon and Héran 1987, Jackson 1993)<sup>3</sup>.

When coupled with the fiction of duration, the idea of love as destiny makes the involuntary ending of a relationship, for instance the death of one’s partner, much more acceptable than a voluntary separation. This is illustrated by the fact that many of the *de facto* partners who we interviewed were more likely to write a will than a cohabitation

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2. Swidler (2001: 26) emphasizes the coexistence, among her middle class, American participants, of two seemingly contradictory love semantics: according to the first, love is a voluntary commitment; according to the second, to love someone is not a personal decision. In our sample, we observed the second semantics, although interviewees also mentioned love as work and continuous investment in the relationship. These combined rules of meaning, while contradictory, can coexist.

3. This is a commonplace that studies on homogamy partially contradict. Homogamy refers to the fact that people tend to choose a partner in the social group (occupation, cultural background, socio-economic status, level of education etc.) to which they belong.

agreement<sup>4</sup>, since in doing the latter, one would have to entertain the inadmissible thought that partners could willingly decide to terminate their relationship (Belleau, 2011). In contrast, a will is seen as an altruistic gesture, an act of taking care of the other even after death. When asked directly, very few partners conceded having planned arrangements in the event of a break-up (in the form of savings, financial agreements, etc.). Much like the fiction of duration, the idea of love as destiny relegates the social phenomenon of conjugal instability to a blind spot.

### 3. *Love as work, or the ongoing investment in the relationship*

A third meaning rule defines the intimate relationship as the result of ongoing work. Love is built through daily, sustained investment in the relationships, as well as through renewed mutual demonstrations of commitment (Kruithof 1979; Mahlmann 1991; Luhmann 1982). Such commitment requires conscious and consistent efforts to maintain harmony, communication, transparency and trust. While one falls in love without having decided it, the subsequent commitment rests on the reiteration of the will to live together (Swidler 2001).

With the emerging romantic paradigm of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the idea that people can “work” on their relationship was already circulating. This relationship work, which 19<sup>th</sup> century self-help books already identify as women’s prerogative (Mahlmann 1991), is regarded as a sign of the good intentions and commitment of spouses to their love and marriage. The implicit idea is that, if *done correctly*, there is no intrinsic reason for love to fail. And in the event that a love *does* fail, the blame is attributed to a neglectful spouses. Jonas’s research (2007) shows the persisting gendered imbalance of this “relational work”; even late 20<sup>th</sup> century counseling literature still encourages women to be the “managers” of their couple as a sign of love.

In Quebec, the injunction to ongoing investment in one’s relationship has ironically undermined the very institution of marriage in which it was once expressed. The promise of reciprocal engagement as an official act that occurs at a specific time once and for all, is now perceived as being at odds with the idea of ongoing investment in a relationship (Bozon 2016)<sup>5</sup>. Because the legal framework surrounding marriage in

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4. In Quebec, *de facto* spouses have the opportunity to sign an agreement between them which allows for the definition of the obligations of each partner during the relationship and to predict, for example, what will become of property and children in case of separation.

5. Today in Quebec 40 % of couples live outside marriage, which represents the largest proportion of *de facto* partners in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017). In 2006, Quebec was also leading the way in most countries for which recent

Quebec allows more or less formal celebrations, these events sometimes resemble love rituals (marriage celebrated at home, in privacy, in bucolic places, etc.) more than public statements of a lifelong commitment. Several participants explained that they married to celebrate ten, fifteen or twenty years together, as the literature also points out (Girard *et al.*, 2013). In such arrangements, marriage is understood as another way to maintain and revive the passion in a relationship (Maillochon 2016). A female participant, Maryse, who has been married for one year following two decades of cohabitation, expressed this idea in terms of daily commitment: “I think you can be as committed, in a *de facto* relationship, depending on your beliefs, simply. [...] We have been happy for 20 years. Daily commitment was present before as after marriage.” For many couples, having children together involves a greater commitment than marriage itself precisely because it corresponds to the idea of a common daily investment in their relationship (Belleau 2011).

#### 4. Communication

The idea of relationship work is closely related to the injunction to communicate; by expressing themselves in a conjugal dialogue, partners show their ongoing investment in their relationships (Martin 2003; Treas *et al* 2014). This injunction is a central aspect of the 20<sup>th</sup> century semantics of love as partnership, and is the result of the merging of therapeutic and democratic cultures in intimate relationships (Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1999) with the “emotional” turn of capitalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Illouz 1997).

Among our participants, communication was often seen as an important bulwark that helps to maintain togetherness and avoid the threat of a break-up. For example, one woman identified communication as one of the three key features of a love relationship: “Communication, for me, that’s the secret, if you do not want conflicts that can escalate and become unbearable and just break a couple” (Anne, female participant, *de facto* union). This meaning rule also implies a rejection of legal arrangements and solutions; legal action (writing or breaking a contract) is often perceived as an admission that a conflict cannot be overcome through communication, or that there is an absence of communication. Conversely, the avoidance of legal counseling while separating is seen as a sign of maturity, trust, and productive dialogue (Volery 2011).

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data are available, including Sweden (25.4 %) and Finland (23, 9 %) (Milan *et al.*, 2007). The majority of children are born from unmarried parents in Quebec (Girard *et al.*, 2012).

### 5. *Altruism and disinterest*

A well-known French maxim expresses the idea behind the fifth meaning rule: “En amour, on ne compte pas” (*When one loves, one shouldn't count*): the partner's and the couple's interests should always come first (Henchoz 2008). As one participant explained: “Obviously our partner should be the focus of our lives, our efforts, our energies. I would say that we do nothing that would be at odds with respecting the other. The partner has priority over all others” (Simon, male participant, married couple). Altruism, selflessness, and self-sacrifice are entrenched domestic and family norms; a lover or parent must act for the sake of the beloved ones, without calculating the costs (Bozon and Héran 2006; Kauffman 1993; de Singly 1996), since, in the context of love relationships, a good deed is considered rewarding in itself (Schneider 1968). Both material and immaterial generosity serves the relationship, especially in the beginning.

Partners can hardly prioritize their own financial, legal, sexual, or personal interests without contravening this meaning rule. For example, our research, as well as that of other scholars investigating financial arrangements between partners, has shown that partners seldom discuss money issues, except in the face of impending separation (Belleau et al 2017; Burgoyne and Morisson 1997; Henchoz 2008; Nyman and Evertsson 2005). Taking inspiration from Hochschild's studies of emotion work, Henchoz shows that the daily production of love can generate, maintain, or dissimulate inequalities within relationships; for instance, partners may avoid mentioning economic inequalities between them in order to strengthen the (romantic) norm of selfless giving (Henchoz 2014: 32). Additionally, this meaning rule legitimizes expectations with regard to the beloved one's behavior; we can assume that our partner will not prioritize his or her interests over our own. When one partner addresses legal or financial issues, this is often interpreted as a lack of trust, or even as a form of selfishness. One participant's comments illustrate this well. To the question, “Did you think about the legal dimension when you got married?”, he responded:

Of course she does not see finances, money, possessions like me. Often in the past, it was a thing that annoyed me when ... You know she always has the habit to say: “Well, the house is half yours, half mine... that's mine...”. There I said, “Look, it's up to us, you know, you have to understand that ...” She was always inclined to be a little selfish on that side, but you have to look at her previous experience. [...] For me, money is not important. Material goods are more important to her. (Marc, male participant, married couple)

Symbolizing unity and romantic merging, this meaning rule decreases the chances that partners will plan legal and financial arrangements in the event of a break-up, since planning entails an explicit discussion in which their interests are opposed.

#### 6. *Delayed reciprocity*

Kellerhals *et al.* (2004) argue that delayed reciprocity is a way for partners to reconcile the criterion of merit (calculating a fair distribution of resources and responsibilities) with that of selfless giving (love without counting); partners take for granted that what they give today will eventually be reciprocated. In contemporary love semantics, delayed reciprocity refers to both the notion of exchange and the duration of an intimate relationship. This exchange is based on the equality of the partners and a system of culturally-defined equivalences (Henchoz 2008). At least three elements carry weight in a household's balance of equivalences: the time and energy devoted to the well-being of the family; the financial contribution of each partner; and the care-taking tasks performed in domestic work and child-raising. It is entirely possible for one partner to contribute more time or money than the other without destabilizing the general balance. One participant expressed this idea with a nice metaphor:

When it's raining, it's not always the same partner who has to hold the umbrella. It's like that. At a given moment it rains in your partner's house, you take your umbrella, you hold it for your partner... If it rains at your place, your partner will hold it for you. If it rains in both places, well, both will hold the umbrella [laughs]. (Eric, male participant, *de facto* union)

The balance of the exchange is assessed over a long period. More than half of our participants described managing money through pooling their incomes to support one another as they experienced income fluctuations. However, these arrangements of reciprocity are not necessarily the product of explicit agreements. To avoid tensions and arguments, some couple indefinitely delay any discussion regarding the fairness of their practical arrangements. In this case, the relationship persists, but imbalances and inequalities remain concealed, further discouraging any open discussion between partners. According to our results, these inequalities and imbalances are usually gendered; while men invest more in terms of money, women contribute more in terms of time and energy, and the consequences of these imbalances are more harmful for women than for men in the long run.

Delayed reciprocity is based on the fiction of duration, which suggests that a relationship will last long enough for reciprocation or compensation to eventually occur. When asked about what a love relationship is, one participant evokes several symbols of love, such as ongoing investment, altruism, and reciprocity:

It is to accompany a person where she is and in her good and bad times. And it is to be present. I think... it's support... it's being there when the other person needs you. I think you cannot always give without ever receiving. It's clear, it has to be reciprocal. (Justine, female participant, married couple)

When a separation occurs, all the previously concealed imbalances resurface. Delayed reciprocity, as a meaning rule, becomes obsolete and the failure of its fulfillment becomes conspicuous. At this point, each partner is in a position to recognize that reciprocation and compensation of persisting inequalities (whether financial, domestic, or otherwise) has not happened and never will. Delayed reciprocity also relies on the rule of mutual trust.

### *7. Trust as foundation of a relationship*

As the role played by marriage in stabilizing intimate relationships declines, emphasis has shifted towards the relational dimension of partners' commitment (Bozon 2016; Kirkby 2008). Conjugal relationships increasingly rely on the moral power of mutual trust rather than on legally or religiously sanctified agreements. The additional emphasis placed on trust also highlights the self-referentiality of romantic love, where love provides its own foundation and justification (Luhmann 1982). In other words, conjugal relationships are increasingly grounded in the power of love rather than being secured by institutions and social norms. This meaning rule rejects the logics of law at work in the written word and the negotiated agreement, which are seen as being at odds with the involuntary, self-sufficient nature of the love relationship (Bergström 2013).

Because of its capacity to establish and maintain connections even in the face of uncertainty and incomplete information, trust is an irreplaceable support for social relationships. Trust is a cognitive shortcut that makes it possible to forego cyclic calculation and verification in making day-to-day decisions (Luhmann 1968; Van de Rijt and Busken 2006; Watier 1996). When considered in this broader context, trust can be very rational, deepening with time in concrete relationships.

Paradoxically, however, the growing importance of trust in contemporary love experience may have the effect of weakening unions. Much

like the other meaning rules discussed above, trust can be an obstacle to explicit negotiation between partners. The injunction to trust reinforces the meaning rules of selfless giving and loving without counting; sometimes as many as ten years of conjugal life must elapse before it becomes possible to contravene these rules in order to discuss personal interests. Hence, in newer relationships, the desire of one partner to get married or to sign an agreement may be perceived by the other as indicating a lack of trust. Some believe that to “take as many precautions [for drafting a common-law agreement] can mean that one may anticipate that it will not work” (Marie-Andrée, female participant, *de facto* union).

Because they prefer to avoid addressing the possibility of a break-up, most couples do not like talking about money or contracts in order not to weaken their mutual trust. The example of Louis and Isabelle, far from unique, is eloquent. When buying their house, the couple received a sum of money from Isabelle’s mother for the down payment required by the bank. Louis believes that his *de facto* partner had “enough confidence” in their relationship, “not to sign ... a paper “indicating where the down payment came from when buying their home,” despite the insistence of his mother-in-law. In the latter case, it can also be assumed that co-owning a house will likely strengthen trust between spouses. Indeed, this shared economic security has in return the effect of reinforcing the idea that spouses have all the reasons to trust each other.

### 8. *Fidelity and exclusivity*

Despite transformations in attitudes regarding conjugal relationships (Treas *et al.* 2014) and the increasing tendency to view sexuality as a physiological need (Genard 2005), fidelity and exclusivity continue to form the two sides of a fundamental meaning rule of contemporary love (Blais *et al.*, 2014, Graber *et al.*, 1999, Previti and Amato 2004), especially for heterosexual couples (Green and Valleriani 2016). While couples often simply equate fidelity with sexual exclusivity, its scope may widen to encompass both moral and sexual loyalty, which form a continuum (Bawin-Legros 2004, Blow and Hartnett 2005, Frank and DeLamater 2010). In this way, the rule of fidelity and the rule of trust support each other in contemporary love semantics.

The monogamous norm characterizing the romantic tradition extends far beyond the institutional or religious framework of marriage. The symbolic importance of the norm of exclusivity is great even where relationship boundaries are not yet clearly defined, when the relationship does not have a strong institutional structure (marriage) or even a

material one (cohabitation, sharing of the home [Carter *et al.* 2016]). During our interviews, several partners more or less explicitly outlined their definition of loyalty and how they respect their conjugal agreement. Most identified marital fidelity with respect, authenticity and, above all, trust; being disloyal to one's partner was viewed as a breach of trust that could fatally endanger the relationship. For Etienne, "this is significant because we thought it was an exclusive relationship. So if loyalty was not there, the relationship would not last" (Etienne, male participant, *de facto* union).

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on our results, we have identified eight meaning rules which are employed by actors to face the challenges of contemporary intimate relationships. In this final section, we will discuss the "logics" of couples and the "logics" of the contemporary sociological literature on intimacy more generally.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Quebec heterosexual couples whom we met operated by combining semantic elements stemming from cognitive and practical relationship patterns that sometimes diverged; meaning rules encouraging mythical idealization through images of destiny and romantic merging were combined with meaning rules hinging on ideas such as relationships as work, relationships as therapeutic communication, and entrepreneurial relationship maintenance. However, this second set of meaning rules do not necessarily encourage a cold, calculative, or realistic attitude; the introduction of these rules simply encouraged the development of a less traditional idealization style in which traditional semantic elements were reinterpreted and combined with the partnership pattern. Different idealization styles for love (such as destiny, work, selfless giving, etc.) are integrated (Piazzesi *et al.* 2018) and jointly contribute to stabilizing the couple, in addition to relegating "social facts" such as the increasing divorce and separation rate, serial monogamy, and gender inequalities in the division of labor and in the consequences of break-ups to a blind spot.

In our investigation of financial arrangements in heterosexual couples, the reluctance of participants to discuss money or contracts between partners made it possible to identify the boundaries separating love from the logics of the market, but also to observe the intertwining of these two "worlds" (Belleau, 2011). Money supports intimate relationships (through presents, economic support, etc.) and

vice versa, but the meaning rules of love can conceal inequalities and power relationships within couples. Consciously or unconsciously, couples tend to overlook subjects that threaten to create tensions and conflicts in a strategic effort to maintain a harmonious relationship. This “good understanding” of lovers is often based on a fictitious consensus, which is taken for granted by the partners until a reality-check reveals its ephemeral nature (Hahn 1991).

It is also remarkable that the logics of the dissolubility of the “pure relationship” (Giddens 1992) does not appear to have altered the practices of heterosexual couples, which continue to maintain a non-realistic attitude with regard to both the finiteness of the relationship and to the voluntary, deliberate, and negotiated nature of a break-up. As our analyses have shown, the meaning rules of love discourage partners from anticipating (not to mention planning) a break-up.

This brings us to the second type of “logics”; we have observed that contemporary literature on love and couples features a double confusion. Firstly, several theorists attempt to describe the mainstream love imaginary (autonomy, authenticity, “purity” of bonds, etc.) without investigating the degree of correspondence between this imaginary and the ideas and logics shaping couples’ actual behaviors and practices (Jamieson 1999, Piazzesi 2014). As we have shown, the meaning rules employed by contemporary couples remain deeply rooted in the traditional romantic paradigm, which has not been abandoned, but instead reinterpreted to better address the stakes and challenges of contemporary society. The second confusion mirrors the first. In taking their cue from theories of modernization, many family specialists in the fields of law, economics and other disciplines appear to ignore love semantics when approaching conjugal relations. In these modernist portraits, partners are depicted as autonomous, independent, free-willed individuals, negotiating agreements on the basis of a market-like rationality. Despite its significant influence on concrete practices, emotional interdependence seldom receives adequate consideration in these accounts (Blais *et al* 2014, Génard 1995). As we have shown, love semantics shape romantic partners’ practices, expectations, and conceptions of intimate relationships in very concrete ways.

Research on couples’ practices that separates the logics of love from the logics of economics simply replicates the normative oppositions between the antagonistic worlds (Zelizer 1997) of love and money (personal interest, profit, calculation) that structure partners’ expectations. However, as Zelizer and others have argued, these two “worlds” are deeply intertwined in the very same actions

and discourses that aim to conceal the connections between them. This intertwining motivates our interest in observing couples' practices through the prism of the meaning rules which jointly orient the practices and decisions of daily life in its affective and material aspects despite originating in very different logical patterns.

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