

When men become upset. Economic upheaval and relationship conflict in comparative perspective

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Introduction

The dynamics that lead to conflict between the partners are complex and multidimensional (Cox and Brooks-Gunn 1999). One of the dimensions that has been less explored is the association between marital conflict and couples' relative resources in European countries (Vannoy and Cubbins 2001). According to this perspective one could interpret the different degrees of conflict and severity of disagreements as the result of the move from traditional to non-normative partnerships in which men lose symbolic power (Macmillan, Ross and Rosemary Gartner, 2018). This move would correspond to what some authors have referred to as the *partners' status inconsistencies theory* (Rodman 1972 and Gelles 1974). This theory predicts that educational and occupational advantaged positions of female spouses disrupt traditional patriarchal roles and challenge *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This disruption can turn into conflict or increase disagreement between the partners leading to high conflict situations.

Our article combines cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis to address two main research questions: i) What are the main variables associated with couples experiencing high conflict within the relationship? And ii) To what extent is a change towards high conflict within couples related to the occurrence of loss of male power in the relationship?. In order to address these questions we pose three main hypotheses:

1. We expect that couples where the **male spouse holds an inferior position** within the relationship will be more likely to experience high level of relationship conflict.
2. The more traditional the couples are, the lower the risk of high degree of conflict. **Gender values mediate in the conflict situation** as egalitarianism entails more tolerance to status incongruence (i.e., women with higher occupational status or economic power).
3. We expect that a **loss of male power** within the couple leads to a higher report of change into a high conflict situation.

Data and methods

The study is based on waves 1 and 2 of the Gender and Generation Survey – GGS- for 4 countries (France, Austria, Bulgaria and Russia). We select men and women aged 18 to 60 which are present in both waves to analyse change over time in their degree of conflict.

Disagreement index and change towards a high conflictual situation

We approach marital conflict through the severity of disagreements on daily interactions. In order to measure the extent of disagreements in the relationship, we created a disagreement

index of eight items that have to do with interactions in the sphere of household chores, money, use of leisure time, sex, relations with friends, relations with parents and in-laws, having children, and drinking alcohol. A ninth item about child-raising issues is analyzed separately only for couples with children. The reliability of the summed scale is 0.81 in wave 1 as well as in wave 2.

A change towards a high conflict situation occurs when in wave 1 the respondent reported a conflict level of less than 2.5 out of 5, whereas (s)he reported a level of 2.5 or more in the second wave. We then constructed the following variable: 0 "stable or change to low or middle conflict level" 1 "increase to high conflict level".

Main explanatory variables: Couple status and loss of male power

For the cross-sectional analysis we use three different variables to capture the relative status of the partners: i) Couple typology (Male bw, Female bw, both unemployed); ii) Relative socioeconomic status of the partners and iii) Relative education of the partners.

For the longitudinal analysis when we observe a loss of male's job within the household or an increase in women's relative occupational status within the couple (via an upgrade of her occupational status or a downgrade of his status), we assume that there is a loss of male power within the couple.

Control variables

Couple level variables: mean occupational status of the couple; whether cohabiting, premarital cohabiting, or married; number of years living together (union duration) and union duration squared; age and educational differences; mean education, age youngest child between 0-6, age youngest child between 6 and 17; outsourcing of household tasks; gender role values (high score is more egalitarian); making ends meet (from very difficult to very easy); household income (in deciles); whether couple lives in urban vs rural area; division of household labour¹.

Individual level variables: age, age², education, health; whether respondent is native, egalitarian values, perception of making ends meet.

Finally, our logistic regression models also introduce country fixed effects to account for the differences between the countries in the effect of the explanatory variables that we are analyzing.

Preliminary results

The proportion of couples reporting high conflict ranges from 5 to 10% in the countries analyzed, both for men and women, except for Russia where the levels reach 15% for men and almost 17% for women. When we first explore the individual and couple characteristics associated to high conflict we conclude that the fact that the male spouse holds an inferior position implies that partners are more likely to report high relationship conflict. For women, being breadwinners and having higher education than their partners is positively associated with conflict. For men, this is only true if we do not control for country fixed effects, suggesting that the effect is not homogeneous across countries (see Table 2). As hypothesized

¹ Sum of participation in 'meals + dishes + shopping + vacuum'. Higher score = men does more in the household.

having egalitarian values is negatively associated with high conflict and it attenuates the effect of the male spouse holding and inferior position (see Figure 1).

When we second explore the factors determining a change towards high conflict, we observe that, for men, the loss of their job and the upgrade of his partners status is related to transition into high conflict relationship, but only if we do not control for other characteristics (see Table 3).

Table 2. Logistic regression predicting the likelihood of experiencing high conflict (wave 2)

	Men			Women		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Dual earner (ref.)	0.000	0.000	0.000			
Male breadwinner	0.055	-0.103	-0.195	0.193*	0.024	-0.097
Female breadwinner	0.315*	0.054	-0.007	0.457***	0.350**	0.290*
Both unemployed	-0.083	-0.411*	-0.574**	0.256*	0.031	-0.121
Similar status (ref.)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Female lower status	0.264	0.274	0.212	0.068	0.032	0.015
Female higher status	0.397**	0.219	0.145	0.364***	0.173	0.163
Both low education (ref.)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Female lower education	0.330*	0.415*	-0.181	0.558***	0.662***	0.137
Female higher education	0.349*	0.403*	-0.088	0.768***	0.795***	0.464**
Both high education	0.841***	0.776***	0.044	0.899***	0.860***	0.274*
Egalitarian values		-0.172*	-0.137		-0.118*	-0.220***
_cons	-2.222***	-0.033	-0.408	-1.768***	0.206	0.354
N	5114	5114	5114	7237	7237	7237

Note: * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.02, *** p < 0.002

(1) controlled for missing on ISEI + ISEI

(2) + ISEI, age, age², commitment, cohabiting/marital status, age difference, age of the child(ren), outsourcing, household income, urban/rural area, division of household tasks

(3) + country fixed effects

Figure 1. Predicted probability of high conflict by gender values and couple typology for men and women

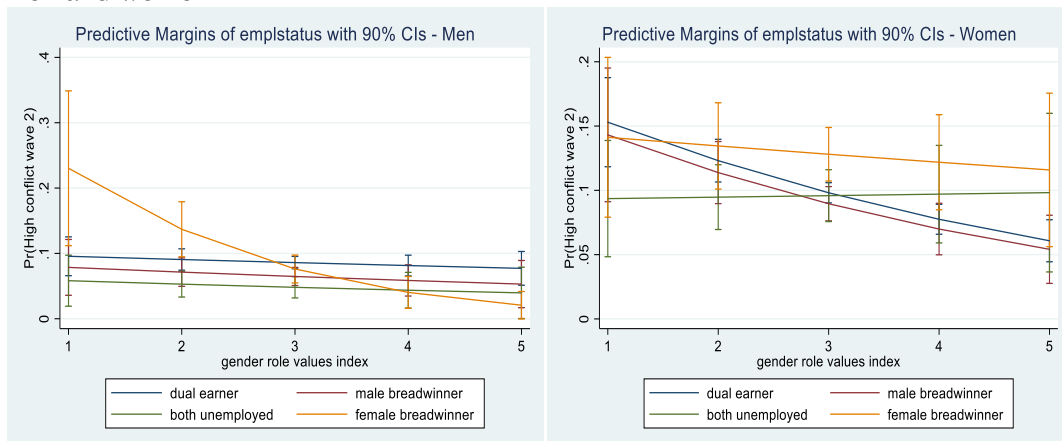


Table 3. Dynamic analyses of experiencing a change to high conflict by loss of male power

	Men			Women		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
His job loss	0.846**	0.643*	0.673*	0.354	0.269	0.301
Her job loss	0.328	0.235	0.385	-0.692	-0.712	-0.613
Both job loss	-1.189	-1.086	-1.221	1.125	1.209	1.001
Upgrade in her ISEI	0.294*	0.181	0.134	-0.067	-0.139	-0.088
Downgrade in his ISEI	0.266	0.067	0.039	0.131	0.052	0.060
_cons	-2.778***	-1.321	-1.740	-2.418***	-0.922	-1.607*
N	3377	3377	3377	4807	4807	4807

Note: * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.02, *** p < 0.002

(1) controlled for missing on ISEI, ISEI

(2) + ISEI, age, age², education, health, cohabiting/marital status, age difference, change in the number of the children, change in perception of making ends meet, household income

(3) + country fixed effects

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