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# The impact of friendship structures on marital quality of heterosexual couples

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## Abstract

In this research, we considered how various structural aspects of friendship networks relate to marital quality according to gender. To investigate this issue, we drew on data from a large longitudinal survey on marital functioning based on 903 heterosexual couples living in Switzerland. Using reports from male and female partners, we explored the extent to which joint contacts, transitivity, and overlap in friendship structures affect various indicators of marital quality for husbands and wives in the long run. Our results indicate that separate, low transitive friendship networks affect marital quality negatively for women, but not for men. We also discuss the importance of the results for understanding the dynamics of heterosexual couples within larger relational contexts beyond dyadic interactions, as well as the relevance of separately analyzing husbands' and wives' marital dynamics.

## KEYWORDS

friendship, marital satisfaction

**Statement of Relevance:** The findings show that friendship structures characterized by higher interdependences between partners are associated with higher marital quality, but only for women, underlining the importance to adopt a gendered perspective in the study of marital quality. Moreover, this study is one of the very few based on a representative sample with longitudinal interviews of both partners in each couple.

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# 1 | YOUR FRIENDS ARE NOT MINE: THE EFFECT OF GENDER FRIENDSHIP STRUCTURES ON MARITAL QUALITY IN HETEROSEXUAL COUPLES IN SWITZERLAND

The factors affecting marital quality extend well beyond the dyadic relationship partners have with each other (Bott, 1957; Burger & Milardo, 1995). These relationships are embedded in friendship structures that exert considerable influence on how partners interact with each other (Stein et al., 1992). As many crucial dimensions of couple interactions relate to gender inequality (Krüger & Levy, 2001; Levy et al., 2013), the main purpose of this paper is to investigate the interrelation of friendship structures with marital quality across gender. Although research on the interrelation between friendship structures and marital quality has made recent advances (Cohn-Schwartz et al., 2020), it remains unclear how such structures relate to gender. In this research, we address this issue based on a large representative sample of couples of various duration, featuring a variety of measures of friendship structures and marital quality.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | Friendship network structures and marital quality

Although the role of friendship networks in couples' dynamics and marital quality is well recognized, most studies have privileged the interactions of the marital dyad with kinship ties, highlighting positive and negative dimensions of relationships such as family support or family interference (Milardo, 1989; Widmer et al., 2009). Moreover, existing research on interactions between couples and their friends either consider their influence together with relatives (overshadowing the uniqueness of friendship characteristics and functions) or neglect the patterns of interconnectedness among couples' friends (Helms et al., 2003; Kearns & Leonard, 2004). The present study takes into account three different dimensions of friendship structures, namely the joint contact couples have with their respective friends, friendship transitivity, and the overlap between partners' friendship networks. In the following, we will discuss each of these dimensions and their associations with marital quality.

#### 2.1.1 | Joint contacts

In the present study, joint contacts with friends refer to partners seeing their respective friends together rather than separately. A similar measure was used by Kearns and Leonard (2004) as part of their latent construct of network interdependence. One indicator of this construct was indeed the amount of time husbands included wives in the interactions with their network members and vice-versa. It is useful to consider the degree to which spouses are engaged in joint social contact with friends for several reasons. First, seeing friends together as a couple rather than individually can not only strengthen the relationship with friends but also the marital relationship, as it reinforces the couple's social identity (Ketokivi, 2012). Moreover, friends who meet with the couple rather than with the wife or husband separately are more likely to give support and advice to the couple to solve their disagreements or relationship problems rather than having a partisan perspective. In summary, face-to-face interactions with friends of the spouses can facilitate coordination of social resources within a network, build trust and

value consensus among spouses, and decrease the likelihood of divorce (Cornwell, 2012). Therefore, attention should be devoted to the spouses' frequency of joint social contact with friends. We argue that spouses who do not have joint contacts with friends have less marital quality than those who visit friends together as a couple. In the present study, joint social contacts refer to in-person meetings. Even though contact can be maintained via other means (e.g., phone calls, e-mail, social media), such communication is less likely to occur jointly compared to in-person meet-ups.

### 2.1.2 | Friendship transitivity

Another important feature of friendship structures is their transitivity, or the extent to which the friends within the network know each other. This means that if A and B are friends, and B is friends with C, then it is highly likely that A will also become friends with C (Holland & Leinhardt, 1971). Overall, friendship structures tend to be highly transitive, as strong ties are likely to form closed triads (Granovetter, 1973). Following the balance principle, individuals tend to avoid inconsistent relationships and privilege transitive relationships (Heider, 1958; Widmer, 2006). As third parties, friends can serve provisional and preventive functions for the couple (Milardo & Helms-Erikson, 2000). The provisional functions correspond to the exchange of companionship and emotional and instrumental support, whereas the preventive functions refer to the provision of advice on marital issues, such as discouraging separation and incentivizing joint investments (Klein & Milardo, 2000). When friends know each other, it becomes easier to coordinate the provision of support and partners can easily access relationship advice, reducing divorce proneness and increasing marital quality (McDermott et al., 2013). We, therefore, expect that partners with higher friendship transitivity have higher levels of marital quality.

### 2.1.3 | Friendship overlap

Network overlap is defined as the extent to which partners have mutual friends (Milardo, 1982). The couple's embeddedness in mutual or exclusive friendship structures matters not only in the development and stability of the marital relationship but also in its dissolution or breakup (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). A higher risk of breakup is found in couples who have low structural interdependence, such as segregated friendships, friends' disapproval, and weak communication with the partner's friends (Parks & Adelman, 1983). Therefore, the continuation of a couple's relationship might be reinforced by overlapping friendships. Indeed, the development of joint lifestyles and the social interdependence tied to marriage create a common form of marital capital, increasing the available resources and the costs of a potential breakup (Felmlee, 2001; Kalmijn & Bernasco, 2001; Milardo, 1982). Regarding the preventive role of friends as third parties, Klein and Milardo (2000) found that partisan support in marital conflicts is more likely to occur in the presence of low overlap between spouses' friends, and critics are more often found among the spouses' separate contacts. Thus, shared friends are more likely to act as mediators by encouraging compromise, whereas separate friends can encourage more contentious resolution strategies.

One possible explanation for the positive effect of network overlap on marital quality is the networks' contribution to the reinforcement of the couples' identity (Jones, 1980; Kearns &

Leonard, 2004; Milardo, 1989). In addition, willingness to be involved in the partner's network conveys security and recognition of one's value to the relationship. Thus, a lack of involvement might be understood as a sign of uncertainty regarding the partner and of fear of social disapproval. Network approval is therefore paramount for uncertainty reduction, as positive feedback from network members reinforces the feeling that the partners are right for each other (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000).

## 2.2 | Gendered friendship structures

Although friendship structures are associated with marital quality and well-being, this relational interdependence may not function identically for men and women, as they are distinct in a variety of ways (Kalmijn, 2003). Findings indicate that women are more likely to have exclusive friends than men (McPherson et al., 2001). One possible explanation lies in the different nature of friendships traditionally associated with men and women. Female friendships fulfill needs related to intimacy and emotional support, whereas male friendships fulfill needs related to companionship and shared recreational activities (Aukett et al., 1988; Kalmijn, 2003). The importance of friends for women in the reframing of marital issues also emerged in a study on marriage work, meaning that disclosure with best friends affects the marital relationship (Helms et al., 2003). Marriage work with friends allows women to take a different perspective, validate their claims, and reframe the relationship in a more positive light. However, when communication with the husband is low, marriage work with friends is negatively associated with marriage longevity (Helms et al., 2003).

If, on the one hand, wives can more easily take the place of their husbands' friends in terms of companionship and leisure, on the other hand, husbands are often incapable of being substitutes for their wives' friends in terms of the need for emotional disclosure and support. Therefore, to fill this gap and to overcome the limitations of emotional support in marriage or cohabitation, women are likely to maintain some individualized friendships (Campbell & Lee, 1991; Fischer & Oliner, 1983; O'Connor, 1992). Marriage also plays a more pivotal role in social involvement for men than it does for women, as men tend to rely on their wives for support as confidants than women do on their husbands (Dykstra & de Jong-Gierveld, 2004).

## 2.3 | Gendered marital quality

Men and women differ not only in terms of network structures but also in terms of marital quality. Indeed, in a majority of empirical studies, the level of marital dissatisfaction expressed by the female partner was higher than that expressed by the male partner (Widmer et al., 2004, 2009). Similarly, divorce proneness and a variety of partnership problems are more frequently acknowledged by women than by men (Burlinson et al., 1996; Samter, 2003). Factors affecting marital quality are also somewhat dissimilar for men and women. Among women, marital quality is highly sensitive to relational dimensions within couples such as fairness concerning the division of household and educational labor (Apparala et al., 2003; Forsberg, 2007; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007). This is less true for men, for whom spillover effects from work onto the family seem to play a greater role (Crompton, 2007; Nordenmark, 2002). The effect of spouses' relational interdependences outside the couple might also differ for male and female partners. Previous research indicates that women share friends with their spouses less frequently, and the

functions of men's friends can be taken over by the wife more easily than the reverse (Kalmijn, 2003). Moreover, Fiori et al. (2018) found that husbands' disapproval of their wives' friends predicted divorce, but wives' disapproval of their husbands' friends did not. Here again, the underlying mechanism could be that wives can more easily take over the functions of men's friends (e.g., doing activities together) than husbands can take on the functions of wives' friends (e.g., providing emotional intimacy). Due to the different types of companionship fulfilled by men's and women's friends, wives may be less willing or able to give up their friends, even when their husbands dislike these friends. This indicates that marital quality is a highly gendered phenomenon.

## 2.4 | Summary

Although a growing body of theoretical and empirical research has examined the relationship between friendship structures and marital quality (Cohn-Schwartz et al., 2020; Fiori et al., 2018; Kearns & Leonard, 2004; Stein et al., 1992; Widmer et al., 2004, 2009), there is still no conclusive evidence regarding the extent to which network structures affect marital quality differently for male and female partners. In this study, we aim to fill this gap in the literature using a duocentric social network approach (Jackson et al., 2014; Kennedy et al., 2015). In other words, we asked both partners separately about their friendships and the extent to which they spend time together in the company of friends. Moreover, this study draws on a large representative sample of couples in all life stages with assessments of friendship structures and marital quality at different time points, allowing for a longitudinal study design. Given previous findings, we expect that friendship structures with higher overlap, higher transitivity, and more joint contacts will be associated with higher marital quality (H1). Based on the greater emotional involvement of women in their personal ties and the dependencies of husbands on their wives and on their wives' networks, we expect the positive effects of joint friendship structures to be more important for women than for men (H2).

The case of Switzerland is particularly interesting, as it is a European country with mixed liberal and conservative attitudes toward family policies (Bonoli, 2007; Korpi, 2000). In fact, social policies tend to avoid interfering with the family realm, as this is considered a private matter. Interestingly, in such a context, in comparison with other welfare state regimes with family policies that are more active, in Switzerland, personal networks may have a more powerful influence on couple interactions, as this effect is not likely to be mediated by active policy strategies aimed at promoting equality between husbands and wives. Research on couples in Switzerland indicates that gender issues and their resulting divisions represent a major source of marital problems (Kellerhals & Widmer, 2007; Tettamanti & Widmer, 2020). This makes Switzerland a relevant case study for understanding the interconnections between relational contexts such as network structures and couples' internal dynamics in national situations where state intervention aimed at supporting families is minimal.

## 3 | METHODS

### 3.1 | Sample

We used data from the Social Stratification, Cohesion and Conflict in Contemporary Families survey, a nationally representative survey of heterosexual married and unmarried couples in

Switzerland funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Widmer et al., 2003). Conducted for the first time in 1998, the study's primary goal was to examine how cohesion and conflicts in couples are influenced by partners' social status and position throughout the life course (Widmer et al., 2004). The initial 1998 sample was drawn randomly using a nonproportional stratified design based on Switzerland's three major linguistic regions. A computer-assisted telephone survey questionnaire was translated into the country's three major languages (i.e., German, French, and Italian). It should be noted that at the beginning of this study, there was no institutional review board for studies in the social sciences in Switzerland. Therefore, no institutional approval was granted for this study. The participants provided informed consent prior to being interviewed for the survey.

To be included in the 1998 sample, respondents had to have lived together for at least 1 year. In addition, the youngest partner had to be at least 20 years old, and the oldest partner had to be less than 70 years old. They also had to live in Switzerland, but Swiss citizenship was not necessary. Having children and being married were not conditions for inclusion in the sample, and of the 9% of couples who cohabitated outside marriage, 16% of them were childless, and 30% had no children in the home. For each couple, both partners were interviewed separately and were asked to answer most questions. Only cases in which both partners agreed to be interviewed were included in the survey. Interviews were conducted by phone for a total of 3068 respondents from 1534 couples. For most questions, both partners had to provide an answer, although questions about household characteristics were only asked of one partner to save interview time. Overall, the initial sample had demographic features similar to those of other surveys and micro censuses were taken at the same time among households and families in Switzerland (Swiss Federal Statistic Office, 1998).

After the 1998 baseline survey, three additional waves were conducted in 2004, 2011, and 2017. The initial study was not planned as longitudinal, but the opportunity to organize a follow-up with a few questions arose in 2004 with interviews of female partners from the 1998 data set only, due to budgetary constraints. In 2011 and 2017, thanks to the financial support of the Swiss National Centre for Competence in Research LIVES—Overcoming Vulnerability: Life Course Perspectives (NCCR LIVES), two additional waves of interviews were possible, with a total number of 1089 women interviewed in 2004, each representing her couple, followed by 2341 respondents from 1414 couples in 2011 and 1762 respondents from 954 couples in 2017. Given the lack of participation of young couples in the third wave, 182 new couples in which the woman was between 20 and 30 years old were added to the sample in 2011. The initial obligation of having both partners participate in the survey was dropped in the follow-up waves to include interviews from individuals who were no longer together and to sustain an acceptable response rate. Data for the first three waves are available at the Swiss Center for Expertise in the Social Sciences (FORS) upon request. The fourth wave will be added in the near future.

The current study is focused on Wave 3 (2011) and Wave 4 (2017) of the survey, which asked both partners separately about their personal networks, their marital quality, and the extent to which they spent time together in the company of friends. For the analysis, we focused on a subsample of 634 couples in which both partners answered the questionnaire in Wave 4: 534 couples who participated for the first time in 1998 and who remained together, as well as 100 couples belonging to the new cohort interviewed for the first time in 2011. In Wave 3, the age ranges were quite broad, with men's ages ranging from 21 to 87 years ( $M = 53.33$ ); and women's ages ranging from 20 to 88 years ( $M = 51.00$ ).

## 3.2 | Measures

Three types of measures were considered in this paper: individual variables on marital quality from Wave 4, individual variables characterizing the structure of each partner's friendship structures from Wave 3, and dyadic variables characterizing the couple's context from Wave 3. This longitudinal design allowed us to ensure that friendship structures were established prior to the assessment of marital quality, guaranteeing that deterioration in marital quality does not affect couples' friendship structures. We also controlled all our statistical models for marital quality in Wave 3. The structural measures of friendship networks were not combined in a single conjoint couple indicator because both partners were not asked to identify their friends by name. Because we were not able to guarantee that they referred to the same friends, we considered the perceptions of both partners separately in the models.

### 3.2.1 | Dependent variables (Wave 4)

As measures of marital quality, we considered four indicators: marital dissatisfaction, marital instability (separation thoughts), communication problems, and coordination problems. *Marital dissatisfaction* was measured by asking the respondents the following: "In general, how do you evaluate your relationship (in terms of your understanding of one another, your intimate life, your way of communication...)" The respondents evaluated their marital satisfaction using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*really good*) to 5 (*really bad*). The variable was dichotomized into 1 (*not satisfied*) which included the categories *fairly good*, *neither good nor bad*, *bad* and *very bad* and 0 (*satisfied*) which included the category *really good*.

*Marital instability* was measured by asking the respondents about their experiences with separation intentions and thoughts: "Many couples, after facing some difficulties, have considered separation. Have you also experienced such moments and considered separation?" The response categories were "Yes, but without proceeding," "Yes, quite seriously," "Yes, seriously on those occasions," "Yes, and we have already separated before," which were dichotomized into 1 (*yes*) and "No, never." which was dichotomized into 0 (*no*).

Regarding experiences with *relational and coordination problems*, we computed two variables based on a list of several items representing various difficulties that couples may experience during their relationships. Respondents were asked to report whether they had experienced each of these problems. *The communication problems* indicator was based on lack of communication, sexual problems, and difficulties of adjusting to the other partner's personality. If respondents indicated having at least one of these difficulties, they were recoded as 1 (*having communication problems*). *The coordination problems* indicator was based on the following items: absence of the other, division of domestic tasks, family-work balance, common rhythms and habits, management of leisure time, disagreement regarding children's education, and disagreement regarding a common life project. If respondents indicated having at least one of these difficulties, they were recoded as 1 (*having coordination problems*). The decision to treat these measures separately is based on previous research underlining the importance to make a distinction between those different aspects of marital quality (Spanier, 1976; Widmer et al., 2004).

### 3.2.2 | Independent variables (Wave 3)

For measures of friendship structures, we focused on joint and separate contacts with friends, the level of friendship overlap, and the level of friendship transitivity. *The frequency of joint contacts* with friends was measured by asking the respondent to complete the following statement: “When you visit or go out with your friends, you and your partner are...” Possible answers were “always together,” “together in most of the cases,” “together every other time,” “together in a minority of cases,” and “never together.” We transformed this variable into a dichotomous one with the following levels: joint contacts (“always together” or “together in most of the cases”) and separate contacts (“together every other time,” “together in a minority of cases,” or “never together”).

*The level of friendship overlap* was measured by asking the respondent to choose the option that best characterized their conjugal friendships: “all the same friends,” “mostly same friends,” “mostly different friends,” and “all different friends.” This variable was dichotomized into high overlap (“all the same friends” and “mostly same friends”) and low overlap (“mostly different friends” and “all different friends”).

*Friendship transitivity* was measured using the level of inter-acquaintance among friends. Respondents were asked to choose the option that best characterized the interconnection between their friends: “all my friends know each other,” “most of my friends know each other,” “a minority of my friends know each other,” or “none of my friends know each other.” We dichotomized this variable into high transitivity (“all my friends know each other” and “most of my friends know each other”) and low transitivity (“a minority of my friends know each other” and “none of my friends know each other”).

### 3.2.3 | Control variables (Wave 3)

We also included three control variables: the current family stage, the model of conjugal division of paid work, and the level of educational homogamy. We included these measures as controls because previous research demonstrated that family-life stage (Anderson et al., 1983), educational homogamy (Tynes, 1990), and division of paid work (Wilkie et al., 1998) have potential effects on marital quality. In general, couples with young children experience lower levels of marital quality, as housework and child care have a strain on the couple relationship (Ahlborg et al., 2009). In the Swiss context, this is also often linked to the couple's division of paid work, as the transition to parenthood often implies for mothers to cut back on their workload resulting in part-time employment (Epple et al., 2015; Girardin et al., 2016; Giudici & Widmer, 2016). Concerning educational homogamy, meaning that partners have equal educational levels and therefore are more likely to share the same values and attitudes, it has often been found to have a positive influence on relationship quality. However, there is no strong evidence that hyper- and hypogamy have negative impacts on marital quality (Whisman, 1997).

1. *The current family stage* was determined by crossing four types of information: the age of both partners, whether the couple had children, the presence of children in the household, and the age of the youngest coresident child. Therefore, we considered six categories: childlessness (couples with no children and whose reproductive trajectories were closed; 5% of the sample,  $n = 32$ ), prechildren stage (couples who are childless but still have open reproductive trajectories; 10% of the sample;  $n = 60$ ), preschool children stage (couples who live in the same household with a child or children and whose youngest child is younger than

6 years old; 8% of the sample;  $n = 47$ ), school-age children stage (couples who live in the same household with a child or children and whose youngest child is between 6 and 16 years old; 16% of the sample;  $n = 95$ ), post-school children stage (couples who live with a child or children and whose youngest child is older than 16; 20% of the sample;  $n = 126$ ), and empty-nest stage (couples who had a child or children but whose children have left the parental household; 42% of the sample;  $n = 259$ ). We considered the reproductive trajectories closed when participants were 50 years or older.

2. *The models of conjugal division of paid work* variable were constructed based on the activity rates of both partners and the situation of those who were not working at the time of the survey. The articulation of this information resulted in a five-category variable: dual-earner model (both partners work full-time or part-time; 20% of the sample;  $n = 118$ ), one-and-a-half-earner model (one partner works full-time, and the other partner works part-time; 31% of the sample;  $n = 188$ ), male breadwinner model (the man works full-time, and the woman stays at home; 18% of the sample;  $n = 111$ ), both at home (both partners or one partner is retired, and the other has never worked; 23% of the sample;  $n = 138$ ), and one retired partner (one partner works part-time or full-time, and the other partner is retired; 8% of the sample;  $n = 47$ ).
3. Finally, *educational homogamy* was measured by comparing partners' education levels using three categories, namely low (compulsory education), average (apprenticeship or equivalent degree), and high (university degree or equivalent). The educational homogamy variable includes three categories: homogamy (the partners have the same education level; 42% of the sample;  $n = 265$ ), hypogamy (the woman is more educated; 14% of the sample;  $n = 89$ ); and hypergamy (the man is more educated; 44% of the sample;  $n = 276$ ).

### 3.3 | Data analysis

We begin by presenting descriptive statistics for our sample in terms of marital quality, friendship structure, and control variables, as well as by comparing the differences across gender.

Preliminary joint regression analysis of male and female responses showed a systematic effect of gender on conjugal outcomes, with women showing more dissatisfaction, higher rate of divorce proneness, etc. However, no interaction between network predictors and gender was statistically significant. Because of the dependency of male and female partners' responses within each couple, we performed distinct logistic regression models for male and female partners to estimate the associations between friendship structure and marital quality. Given the high correlation between the three friendship indicators, we tested for their effects in separate models. For each model, we included the friendship structure indicator of the other partner (e.g., men's indicators in women's models and women's indicators in men's model), as partner's friendship structures can have an effect on the other spouse's marital quality. All models controlled for respondents' respective marital quality indicator in Wave 3, family stage, model of conjugal division of paid work, and educational homogamy.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for marital quality and friendship structures for men and women separately. For marital quality, women reported significantly more often to be

dissatisfied with their marital relationship (56% of women vs. 48% of men). Moreover, women indicated having significantly more communication and coordination problems than men (49% of women vs. 40% of men). Finally, women indicated significantly more often to have separation intentions and thoughts than men (35% of women vs. 21% of men).

For the measures of friendship structures, 30% of men and 41% of women reported meeting their friends separately. Moreover, 24% of men and 25% of women reported low overlap between their friends. Finally, 14% of men and 21% of women reported that their friends did not know each other. Joint contact with friends and overlap of friends between partners were strongly associated ( $\chi^2 = 65.01$ ,  $p < .000$  for men;  $\chi^2 = 120.72$ ,  $p < .000$  for women). In other words, the more partners developed joint contacts, the more they perceived their networks to overlap. Moreover, overlap and transitivity in partners' friendship networks were also strongly associated ( $\chi^2 = 24.25$ ;  $p < .000$  for men;  $\chi^2 = 29.52$ ;  $p < .000$  for women). This finding indicates that when partners' networks overlap, their respective friends also tend to know each other.

## 4.2 | Effects of friendship structures on marital quality

This section focuses on the regression analysis assessing the effects of the friendship network structures on marital quality. Table 2 shows the association of indicators of friendship structures with women's marital quality. Separate contacts with friends are associated with more coordination and communication problems and higher marital instability for women. Low transitivity in women's friendship networks is associated with higher levels of marital dissatisfaction, whereas low overlap is associated with more coordination and communication problems and higher marital instability. In sum, women's reports on marital quality are predicted by their friendship structure. The Nagelkerke's Pseudo  $R^2$  for the models testing women's marital quality range between 0.16 and 0.45 indicating modest to moderate model fit (Muijs, 2010).

Table 3 shows the results of regression models for men. Separate contacts and low transitivity in men and women's friendship networks were not significantly associated with any indicator of marital quality as reported by men. Interestingly, low overlap in women's friendship networks was associated with higher marital dissatisfaction, as well as more coordination and communication problems for men. Instead, men's friendship overlap had no significant effect

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics and bivariate analyses for individual variables

Variable	Men (%)	N	Women (%)	N	$\chi^2$
Marital quality (W4)					
Marital dissatisfaction	47.8	567	56.2	644	$\chi^2 = 57.15^{***}$
Coordination problems	40.8	561	49.3	636	$\chi^2 = 27.47^{***}$
Communication problems	40.1	567	49.3	640	$\chi^2 = 48.72^{***}$
Marital instability	20.6	567	34.8	643	$\chi^2 = 78.28^{***}$
Friendship structures (W3)					
Separate contacts	30.2	984	41.1	1074	$\chi^2 = 58.75^{***}$
Low overlap	23.8	953	25.4	1048	$\chi^2 = 43.59^{***}$
Low transitivity	14.3	859	20.8	973	$\chi^2 = 31.93^{***}$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 2** Logistic regression models predicting women's marital quality (odds ratio [95% confidence interval])

Independent variable	Marital dissatisfaction	Coordination problems	Communication problems	Marital instability
Separate contacts women (ref.: joint contacts)	1.25 (0.79–1.98)	1.92** (1.35–3.08)	2.19*** (1.57–3.79)	1.87* (1.15–3.04)
Separate contacts men (ref.: joint contacts)	1.26 (0.78–2.04)	1.02 (0.67–1.59)	0.85 (0.51–1.30)	1.21 (0.73–2.01)
<i>N</i>	479	473	476	479
Nagelkerke's Pseudo $R^2$	0.34	0.24	0.22	0.41
Low transitivity women (ref.: high transitivity)	2.05* (1.06–3.98)	1.28 (0.70–2.33)	1.63 (0.87–3.06)	1.63 (0.81–3.26)
Low transitivity men (ref.: high transitivity)	0.67 (0.30–1.48)	1.40 (0.68–2.89)	1.48 (0.70–3.14)	1.82 (0.78–4.24)
<i>N</i>	352	349	349	352
Nagelkerke's Pseudo $R^2$	0.38	0.21	0.30	0.45
Low overlap women (ref.: high overlap)	1.12 (0.64–1.97)	1.85* (1.09–3.08)	1.79* (1.05–3.05)	1.80* (1.01–3.19)
Low overlap men (ref.: high overlap)	1.11 (0.64–1.94)	1.24 (0.71–1.98)	1.29 (0.75–2.16)	1.10 (0.61–1.99)
<i>N</i>	464	459	462	464
Nagelkerke's Pseudo $R^2$	0.33	0.16	0.18	0.41

*Note:* For each model, we controlled for the friendship structure indicator for men, as spouses' responses are highly correlated. All models were adjusted for family stage, educational homogamy, model of conjugal division of paid work, and the respective indicator of marital quality at baseline.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

on those indicators. In sum, men's reports on marital quality are not predicted by their perceptions of friendship structures, but instead, they are predicted by women's perceptions of such structures. The Nagelkerke's Pseudo  $R^2$  for the models testing men's marital quality range between 0.21 and 0.38 indicating modest to moderate model fit (Muijs, 2010). Overall, the effect sizes of both regression models are similar to what has been found by previous research on the same data (Cohn-Schwartz et al., 2020). As partners were interviewed separately, we only have a limited number of couples for which we have full information of all variables used in the different models. Consequently, the *Ns* vary a lot from one model to another.

### 4.3 | Control variables

With the exception of educational homogamy, contextual variables are also predictors of marital quality for men and women. Women who have preschool-age children reported higher levels of communication problems relative to women in the empty-nest stage, indicating that having preschool children is highly demanding for them. Interestingly, for men, the family stage that stood out as a significant predictor of their marital quality was the post-school age children stage because couples with adult children reported fewer coordination problems than did those

**TABLE 3** Logistic regression models predicting Men's marital quality (odds ratio [95% confidence interval])

Independent variable	Marital dissatisfaction	Coordination problems	Communication problems	Marital instability
Separate contacts women (ref.: joint contacts)	1.16 (0.74–1.82)	0.97 (0.61–1.53)	1.51 (0.94–2.42)	0.93 (0.51–1.71)
Separate contacts men (ref.: joint contacts)	1.12 (0.69–1.82)	1.31 (0.80–2.14)	1.40 (0.84–2.32)	1.40 (0.75–2.60)
<i>N</i>	420	416	420	421
Nagelkerke's Pseudo $R^2$	0.23	0.21	0.30	0.34
Low transitivity women (ref.: high transitivity)	1.28 (0.65–2.52)	0.60 (0.30–1.21)	1.14 (0.55–2.37)	0.84 (0.34–2.07)
Low transitivity men (ref.: high transitivity)	1.34 (0.60–3.01)	1.92 (0.90–4.11)	0.96 (0.40–2.31)	1.42 (0.53–3.78)
<i>N</i>	313	308	312	313
Nagelkerke's Pseudo $R^2$	0.28	0.21	0.38	0.38
Low overlap women (ref.: high overlap)	2.22** (1.25–3.97)	2.22** (1.27–3.88)	1.92* (1.07–3.46)	1.72 (0.85–3.47)
Low overlap men (ref.: high overlap)	1.22 (0.70–2.12)	1.08 (0.62–1.88)	1.13 (0.64–2.01)	1.28 (0.63–2.59)
<i>N</i>	407	403	407	408
Nagelkerke's Pseudo $R^2$	0.26	0.22	0.31	0.36

Note: All models were adjusted for family stage, educational homogamy, model of conjugal division of paid work, and the respective indicator of marital quality at baseline.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

who were experiencing the empty nest. In terms of the models of division of paid work in the couple, compared to retired couples, women in dual-earner couples reported lower levels of marital dissatisfaction. Instead, men who were in a couple in which only one of the partners was retired reported higher levels of marital dissatisfaction. In sum, although family stage and family-work models have a significant effect on partners' marital quality, men and women are sensitive to different stages and models. With regards to marital quality in Wave 3, all four indicators were positively correlated with the respective indicator in Wave 4, meaning that partners who had already lower relationship quality in Wave 3 were also more likely to have low levels of marital quality in Wave 4.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

Based on previous research (Fiori et al., 2017, 2018; Kalmijn, 2003; Stein et al., 1992), this study hypothesized that friendship structures characterized by higher interdependences between partners were associated with higher marital quality. This study, one of the very few based on a representative sample with longitudinal interviews of both partners in each couple, largely confirmed this hypothesis but only for women. Whereas all indicators of marital quality were indeed affected by friendship structures for women, it is striking that results for men never reached statistical significance with the exception of one case. One major explanation for this

difference lays in the distinctiveness of women and men as far as friendship and intimacy are concerned. Such important sets of relationships do not operate similarly for men and women (Kalmijn, 2003).

Women are more likely to have exclusive friends than men are (McPherson et al., 2001), and thus to sustain individualized friendships in their marriage that may play a critical role as surrogates for unsatisfying marital relationships (Campbell & Lee, 1991; Fischer & Oliner, 1983; O'Connor, 1992). Because of the gendered organization of friendship, wives can more easily take the place of the husbands' friends in companionship and leisure, whereas men are often not capable of being substitutes for the wives' needs for emotional disclosure and support (Kalmijn, 2003). Wives substituting friends in place of their husbands for some critical intimacy functions, acknowledged by the presence of unshared friends in the wives' networks, may be crucial for wives' development of a critical stance on their marriages and alternative plans for their relationships' likely futures. Because marriage plays a more pivotal role in social involvement for men than it does for women, and because men tend to rely on their wives for confidant support more often than women do on their husbands (Dykstra & de Jong-Gierveld, 2004), the ability of men to substitute their wives with friends is much less likely and normatively ambivalent. A larger focus on intimacy fulfillment by friendship for women means that the absence of joint friendship structures with their partners means that such critical function is played out beyond the grasp of the husband, and possibly in competition with his companionship.

Of importance is the fact that marriage and family also represent on average a greater factor of personal well-being for wives than it does for husbands (Widmer et al., 2004, 2009). Therefore, having a joint network with their husbands may be of more critical importance for wives as a durable way to link friendship and marriage than it is for husbands. On the other hand, husbands tend to associate their well-being with other dimensions (e.g., professional success), especially in societies such as Switzerland that are still structured by strong gender norms (Bonoli, 2007; Korpi, 2000). They also primarily focus on companionship and activities in their friendships, and just secondly on intimacy. Men give less importance to intimate ties in comparison to other life domains, especially the workplace and their professional trajectories (Crompton, 2007; Krüger & Levy, 2001). Therefore, the extent to which their wives belong to their friendship structures is less consequential. Interestingly, women's low overlap was associated with less marital quality for men, which we interpret as an indirect consequence of the low marital quality felt by women, both partners' marital quality being significantly correlated.

Overall, this study reveals that friendship structures of couples mimic the gendered organization of societies, with distinct master statuses for men and women (Krüger & Levy, 2001). This implies individuals not only do gender through their everyday performances but also through institutional structures. The different, complementary social definitions and institutional framings of male and female master statuses distinguish corresponding, gender-specific participation profiles. In the case of the present study, results confirm that women hold the master status in the couples' social sphere, in which friendship structures play a crucial role, whereas men's master status lies in the labor market and in their professional career development.

This study has several limitations. We used aggregate variables to measure shared contact with friendship ties rather than comparing results from name generators asked to partners separately (Campbell & Lee, 1991). Using such aggregate measures, which made it possible to include a network dimension in the questionnaire without jeopardizing other parts of the questionnaire due to time constraints, may blur the nuances of the network dynamics. Another

limitation is the impossibility of the present measures to detect whether the two partners were mentioning the same friends, which in turn hinders the establishment of a joint measure of the network structure for the couple as a unit. Future developments should provide this information, as well as more effective measures of the ratio of exclusive and mutual friends of each partner. Notwithstanding, this study features the unique advantage of being longitudinal and having two independent interviews for each couple. Indeed, the longitudinal design allowed us to make more reliable predictions on the direction of causality, meaning that friendship structures affect marital quality rather than the other way round. Having two independent interviews for each couple allows to have the female and male perspective. Nevertheless, this also means that couples were only interviewed if both partners agreed to be surveyed. We therefore only have information on those couples, but not couples where only one partner would have been willing to be interviewed, which can lead to a certain selection bias.

Despite these shortcomings, our study confirms the gendered effect of network structures on marital quality. Given the unequal beneficial nature of overlap of personal networks between men and women, future research should investigate the likely consequences of such a divide on the durability of couples.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available at the Swiss Center for Expertise in the Social Sciences at <https://forscenter.ch/>, reference number 12547 (W1-W3). The fourth wave is not yet available.

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