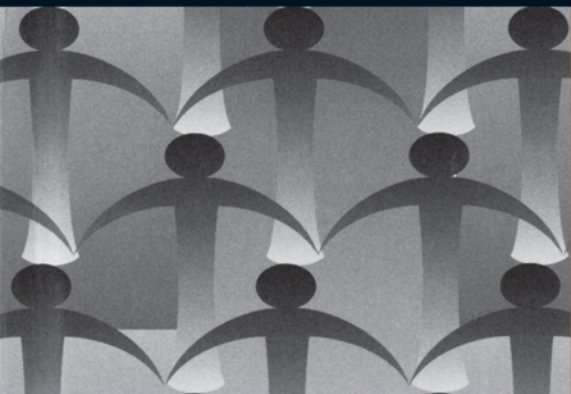


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Conflict and Decision-Making in Close Relationships

Love, Money and Daily Routines

*Erich Kirchler,
Christa Rodler,
Erik Hölzl
and Katja Meier*



CONFLICT AND DECISION-MAKING IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

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Preface

Love, money, and everyday matters in the shared home are the topics of this work. The routines of everyday life in close relationships are described, analysed and interpreted using psychological concepts.

Romantic relationships on the one hand, and the processes and results of decision-making on the other, have long attracted the interest of social research scientists. Decisions in close relationships have, however, been neglected, particularly everyday decision-making involving couples and children. Close relationships have been studied for clinical-psychological reasons, in order to understand dysfunctional processes and to develop targeted intervention programmes. Meanwhile research into decision-making has offered wide scope to economists and social scientists. It has helped them to understand the relationship between economic processes and human behaviour patterns in general. The study of decision-making in close relationships is expected to make a contribution to the wider understanding of such relationships, since the relationship is reflected in joint decisions, even about financial matters, and the manner in which the joint decision is taken indicates the quality of the relationship. In addition, analysis of joint decision-making explains how partners operate in situations where resources are scarce, and how they jointly seek to realise economic and relationship goals.

The studies of decision-making, and particularly of purchasing decisions, in private households summarised here are drawn from the period going back to the start of the 1980s. For almost 20 years research on household decision-making has been conducted at the Universities of Linz and Vienna, Austria. After several years of research, some of the focuses of research and the underlying processes now seem clear and comprehensible. However, scientific studies set up to explore and test hypotheses repeatedly throw up new questions, requiring deeper and more comprehensive analysis. Further studies and more precise questioning have brought us ever closer to a focus

on the actual pattern of decision-making in close relationships, and we hoped ultimately to reach the point where we could present an empirically based overview that would do justice to the complexities of everyday life in the home and which would offer a “manageable model” for decision-making in relationships. However, the latest research work, the Vienna Diary Study, which was intended to provide answers to the many unsolved questions we had gathered, showed that the reality cannot be represented in a model, not even a complex one, without a worrying amount of simplification.

Moreover, increasing dissection of joint decisions drew our attention deeper into the focus of research, with the result that ultimately the sense of overview was in danger of being lost, thereby raising the question of appropriate distance between the researcher and the focus of the research. When a landscape is surveyed from an aeroplane, or viewed from the highest mountain-top, or analysed on a walk through it, it remains the same focus of research, but the perspective changes according to the visible elements and details, and their relationship to one another. In some research areas we may be too close to the couples’ decisions, but what is the optimal distance? When does proximity obscure what we are looking at rather than revealing further details?

This book is divided into five main chapters which follow a chapter on a phenomenological study of decision-making as reported by three couples in the Vienna Diary Study, together with a chapter on definitions and outlines covering love, money, and everyday matters. The five main chapters look at romantic relationships, decision-making, methods of researching decision-making in private everyday life, influence in decision-making in close relationships, and decision dynamics. Where we talk of romantic relationships, we look at goals, structures, and the dynamics of the relationship. In the chapter about decision-making we discuss the processes and topics involved. A lengthy chapter is devoted to methods of researching decision-making, because partners in close relationships may react to outside observers in such a way that intrusion into the private sphere negates the purpose of the research. Finally decision-making, particularly financial decision-making, by couples is discussed: We look at the relative influence of the partners, the interconnectedness of activities within the home, the tactics used to gain influence and the results of disagreements and decision-making. Earlier studies are quoted, but the main focus is the results of the Vienna Diary Study of 1996–1999, which are reported extensively.

We end this preface with words of thanks to the numerous friends, colleagues and institutions that have supported our work. Our thanks go to all those who have spurred us on to further work by their pertinent questioning, and to those whose critical questions have pressed us to provide more precise answers. Many people, mainly couples and their children, made themselves available to us as participants or “interested researchers”

in numerous studies, and they deserve our special thanks. In particular, we wish to thank Rupert Brown at the University of Kent at Canterbury, whose commissioning of this work as part of his series of books on social psychology began the whole process.

This work, and in particular the Vienna Diary Study, was given financial assistance by the Austrian research funding agency *Fonds zur Förderung wissenschaftlicher Forschung* under the project title “P11242-OEK”. We thank all those working at the agency for their unstinting support.

The diary project was carried out at the Institute for Psychology at the University of Vienna, with the assistance of Tanja Auenhammer, Ernestine Georgeacopol, Regina Rettig, Astrid Tietz, and Judith Ulm. We owe them much thanks for their tireless work during a lengthy period of research. In particular, we thank Boris Maciejovsky, who cast a critical eye over the text and made many suggestions for improvements.

Finally we give our thanks to Vivien Ward at Routledge, Taylor & Francis for her friendly encouragement.

All scientists, especially those engaged in the study of social phenomena and particularly of close relationships, are called upon to use language that is gender-neutral. To improve the readability of the text we have chosen not to use repetitions (female/male partner, she and he, etc.), and have usually used the male singular form throughout. It should be understood that statements apply equally to women and men, unless there is explicit reference to specific gender differences.

Erich Kirchler,
Christa Rodler, Erik Hölzl and Katja Meier
Vienna, April 2000

CHAPTER ONE

Decisions in the Shared Home

The aim of this work is to describe the decisions taken by partners in the course of everyday life in close relationships. Analysis is undertaken mainly of economic decisions taken jointly by men and women. Thus the focus is on romantic relationships, on money, and on other demands in everyday life. In order to understand economic decision-making, account must be taken not only of the relationship between the decision-makers, but also of other background elements to the decision. It is becoming increasingly clear that it is necessary to understand everyday life in the home in its totality before any composite part of it will make sense.

Anyone seeking to study joint decision-making in private households will surely ask themselves key questions, which they then seek to answer, such as: Which of the partners is mainly responsible for making which decisions? What affects the relative balance of influence between the partners? How do the partners try to influence or convince each other?

Over the course of 10 years of reflection and empirical research about decision-making, countless data have been collected which offer answers. Admittedly, it is rare to find clear answers, for often the results of one study contradict those of a similar study, and questions that originally appear similar may actually be addressing different things.

Many research attempts to find answers to questions on joint decision-making implicitly make assumptions about decision-making. These assumptions can often not be justified once the dynamics of disagreements and decision-making between partners in everyday life settings have been thoroughly observed. Numerous studies are devised as if the process involved pinpointing a phenomenon that is clearly distinct from other phenomena, or as if partners were aware that they were in the process of reaching a joint decision, expressing their wishes, gathering information, evaluating or choosing. In fact partners spend relatively little time at home interacting with one another and even less time talking to each other. If there is a

disagreement over a particular issue, they often try to avoid conflict and postpone decision-making, instead of considering the objective arguments relating to the issue in order to reach decisions that maximise their own or joint benefit. Actual decision-making is rarely observed, but it is important and can have lasting influence on the relationship.

Decisions have neither a clearly definable start nor a clear end. In the flow of joint activities it often only becomes clear with hindsight that a decision has been reached. Where partners reflect on their decision-making behaviour, they quite often try to understand and interpret their conversations and actions retrospectively as a meaningful sequence of interactions that led to a particular goal.

Decisions within private households, including financial decisions, do not follow the normative–rational model, which acts as a basis for decision-making in economics as a whole. It is only in exceptional instances that both partners take time out from the endless routine activities around the house and consciously reach a joint decision, having weighed up their own wishes, the alternative options and the advantages and disadvantages of each choice. Anyone seeking to offer an adequate description of joint decision-making in close relationships needs to unravel the maze of everyday life patiently and, as far as possible, without pre-judging the issues. This will enable them to identify segments of interactions that could represent fragments of decision-making, slowly putting the pieces together to build up a picture of decision-making.

After years of studying economic decision-making in shared homes, no simple theoretical model can be put forward that could be tested in further studies and assist in creating a prescriptive model to offer insights as to how to reach sensible decisions that nurture relationships. Currently a gap still exists between normative decision-making models and the experience of everyday life in the home, and it is therefore more necessary than ever to involve the participants in decision-making themselves as researchers in their everyday lives, identifying and recording their actions. In this way an evidence base can be built up for economic decision-making and many other activities around the home, which can then be subjected to detailed analysis. The analysis of many such records, built up over a long period of time, and not conducted using a narrowly focused instrument according to some preconceived and rigid concept, may finally throw some light on the dynamics of decision-making in close relationships.

THE VIENNA DIARY STUDY

Answers to various questions about joint economic decision-making were sought in a series of studies starting in the mid-1980s (Kirchler, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1989). Above all, the diary study conceived at the University

of Vienna in 1995 and begun in winter 1995–6, to which this work repeatedly refers, sought to investigate conversations, disagreements, and decision-making of various kinds over a long period of time, in order to answer some important, still open questions (Kirchler, Rodler, Hölzl, & Meier, 1999). An analysis was made of decisions that occurred sequentially over a period of time, in order to identify which factors determined the influence of the partners over purchasing decisions and over other financial and non-financial decisions. Alongside the partners' relative resource contributions, relative competence, and relative interest in a particular decision, the study sought to evaluate the extent to which an individual partner's relative influence over past decisions and relative benefit from past decisions determined his or her relative influence over a current decision. The Vienna Diary Study, which brought together conversations, disagreements, and decisions made by 40 couples over the course of a year, examined the significance of influence determinants in satisfactory and less satisfactory relationships and in relationships where one or other partner dominated, or where both partners had roughly the same say. The regulation of influence over a period of time, like the regulation of exchangeable resources in general, appears to depend on the quality of the relationship between the partners. With regard to relative influence and benefit to the partners in the past, we examined whether different "reserves of influence" and "benefit debts" were operating in satisfactory and unsatisfactory relationships, and whether the disadvantaged partner sought to equalise the uneven distribution of influence and benefit.

In the Vienna Diary Study disagreements and financial and non-financial decisions between partners were studied. At the time of the decision being made, the relative interest of the partners in the decision was recorded, together with their relative subject knowledge, but above all their relative influence and the possible resultant debt of influence or benefit. Detailed recording of these variables allows us to identify the weight of past influence and benefit debt on the current distribution of influence, alongside the relative interest and the subject knowledge of the partners.

In order to analyse the significance of influence determinants in differently structured relationships, it was necessary to carry out the study with satisfied and less satisfied couples in egalitarian, patriarchal, or matriarchal relationships. The study was conducted over a long time-frame, recording all the different decision-making situations that were experienced, so that we could investigate the links in controlling influence across different types of decision, e.g. financial and non-financial decisions, decisions involving value, probability or distributional issues, etc.

The study also looked at the tactics used by one partner to influence the other. It was assumed that alongside the objective–logical arguments, partners in close relationships would also seek to use flattery, the offer of special

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attention, threats etc., to defend their viewpoint and to gain compliance. To understand the dynamic of such interactions, a study was made of which tactics were used in response to “deployment” of a particular tactic by the other partner.

The following issues, which form the essential basis of the Vienna Diary Study, are also central to this book:

- (a) The identification of influence determinants in disagreements and in joint decision-making.
- (b) An analysis of the history of decision-making as a particular determinant of influence.
- (c) The study of tactics used to exert influence.

Other aspects remain open to further study, including the outcomes of decision-making, fairness, satisfaction, and the rationality of decisions. The series of issues addressed requires a detailed description of everyday life in close relationships and consideration of the way in which spouses reconstruct jointly experienced everyday events.

Participation in the Diary Study was open solely to couples who had lived together in a shared home for several years and who had at least one child of school age. The decision to select couples with one or more dependent children was made firstly to ensure a relatively homogeneous sample with comparable family situations. Couples with children were chosen because they represent prototypes of the family, and because the frequency of conflicts appears to be higher in phases of family life where there are dependent children. In total, 40 men and 40 women took part in the study and kept a diary for a year.

The conception and the implementation of the Vienna Diary Study are described later (see [Chapter 5](#)) in greater detail. At this stage we confine our description to the detail that the diary was based on a collection of identical sets of questions, which were filled out every evening. Every evening both partners were asked to reflect on the day just ended and to record separately how long they had spent together, what they had talked about, whether there had been disagreements, and how they would assess the current warmth of the relationship between them. After this they were asked to answer further questions about any disagreements that they had indicated. After describing various aspects of the situation during the discussion, participants recorded their knowledge of the topic under discussion and their level of interest in a decision. They described the context of the conversation and indicated their relative influence and relative benefit from the outcome. They also recorded the tactics they had used in order to move towards agreement over the issue, as well as the type of disagreement.

Finally, they were asked about the fairness of the decision-making and their level of satisfaction with the outcome of the conversation.

The diary includes a vast amount of data, offering insights into everyday life as it is lived over a long time period. The structured set of questions enables quantitative analysis of specific questions. However, it is also valuable to interpret the records as a whole, drawing up a comprehensive picture of events using qualitative analyses. Disagreements can be “fished out” from the daily “stream of events” recorded by the partners, briefly analysed and finally returned to the flow as other topics attract the attention, perhaps to reappear later further downstream. Qualitative analysis of disagreements that were repeatedly raised over time and rarely resolved, but were concluded at some point, led to the realisation that decisions in close relationships are not isolated events with a defined beginning and a definable end. Often the partners cannot see that they are “grappling” with a decision, and as the disagreement is repeatedly brought up there is often a change in the goal of the decision-making process. If couples are asked in retrospect about their behaviour during such a decision-making process, they are often not able to describe the dynamics of the decision-making accurately; rather, they “straighten out” the process and rationalise their behaviour so that not only does the decision reached appear desirable, but also the process itself seems focused on the goal and sensibly conducted to the observer. The case studies that follow, taken from the Vienna Diary Study, exemplify this.

CASE STUDIES FROM THE VIENNA DIARY STUDY: STORIES OF THREE DECISIONS

The following decision-making accounts were found in the diaries of three couples. The cases are powerful examples of how everyday decision-making takes place in patterns far removed from normative, rational models.

Michael and Gina Buy a Car

Michael and Gina have lived together for 18 years and have three children, the youngest of whom is 10 years old. Gina is 38, attended a vocational school and works in a sales capacity for a technical department. Michael is 3 years younger than Gina, followed a course of further education and at the time of the events was working as a homemaker and looking for work. The monthly net household income was between 1400 and 1700 Euro. There was disagreement over how the money was managed: Gina stated that the money was pooled and both partners had access to a joint account, whereas Michael said that they kept separate accounts. Both described their relationship as dominated by Gina, and moderately satisfying.

In the partner diaries, the first mention of the need to buy a car appeared in mid-summer 1996. There were a number of separate conversations where the subject was discussed, and several disagreements. It repeatedly arose in discussions and disagreements over other matters, particularly with regard to Michael finding paid employment, during a period of over a month before a car was finally bought at the end of the summer.

On Sunday 28 July 1996, Gina recorded a disagreement about a new car. Michael's diary makes no mention of this. A few days later the partners again discussed buying a car. Both felt happy and described the disagreement, which they indicated to be slight. There were greater disagreements regarding untidiness in the kitchen and troubles one of their children was having at school. Following a short conversation about the car, the subject was not raised again for over a week. Other problems seemed more pressing: buying a bicycle for their son, Michael's return to work, job applications, and overall career plans.

On 8 August 1996, both partners recorded a conflict over buying a car in their diaries. Gina again raised the matter, and both considered whether they should buy a minibus or a second-hand car, or whether they could do without a car. The total sum involved would be around 7000 Euro. Whereas Gina felt that they had rarely discussed buying a car up till that point, Michael reported that they had often discussed the topic. Michael said he was more knowledgeable about cars than Gina was. Both said that the topic was important to them. The mood of the half-hour conversation was described as relatively objective. Both partners indicated that they had attempted to use rational arguments and clear expression of their wishes to influence the other. Both had roughly equal influence and described the course of the discussion as fair and the outcome of the conversation as satisfactory. A decision was not reached, however, and the topic was shelved after half an hour.

Two days later the conversation was resumed. Alongside other topics of conversation, such as their son's stay in England, a visit to a jazz concert, and work in the workshop (as a hobby), the cost of a new car was discussed. None of these topics led to serious conflicts, and the partners recorded their mood as good. The car was again discussed the next day, because the old car had broken down with the whole family on board and the car battery had had to be replaced. Gina recorded that she and Michael agreed on the need to buy a new car.

On 13 August 1996 Gina wrote that she and Michael had had a discussion about money matters, while Michael reported under "other details" that he had had a discussion with Gina because a planned visit to view a car had not taken place.

Three days later, Michael wrote that he had discussed buying a new car with his wife. Both agreed about the course of the conversation, which

lasted five minutes. Gina recorded that she had already often spoken about a new car and said that she was more knowledgeable than Michael about the matter. Both said the topic was important to them. Gina judged the mood of the conversation to be unpleasant. Both of them, but most of all she herself, had been non-objective and relatively emotional. She had had more influence over him than he over her. Whereas he expressed his wishes openly, she responded with negative emotions and pointed out the usefulness for the children of the car that she wanted to buy. Michael responded not with objective argument, but by distorting facts and by threatening withdrawal of resources. Gina ended the conversation with negative emotions and was annoyed.

They had another conversation, about ten minutes long, about the planned car purchase five days later. Only Gina provided a detailed record of it. The discussion again centred on whether to buy a new car or keep the old one. Michael began the conversation. The mood of the conversation was described as pleasant, with both partners discussing objectively and relatively unemotionally. Both had roughly equal say. Michael began by stating his wishes clearly. Gina reacted, as in the previous discussion, by pointing out the usefulness of the car for the children. He tried to influence her using objective arguments. She emphasised her own wishes and needs. At this Michael withdrew from the conversation. A final decision was again deferred.

Four days later the diaries again recorded the car purchase as a source of conflict. The following day, price comparisons in connection with a car purchase were discussed alongside other topics, such as the expense of 250 Euro for their daughter's holiday, or housework. There were no recorded disagreements.

On 25 August 1996 their son had to be collected from the airport, plants needed watering and other tasks needed to be done. They again discussed buying a car. Gina's diary made it clear that the couple had been to see cars that day. There were no further detailed descriptions relating to the planned car purchase. There was a brief discussion on the following day, with Michael noting that the fixed costs for a new car were too high.

The high fixed costs were again discussed the next day. The partners again disagreed. Gina recorded that Michael did not want to buy a new car. Michael questioned the sense of buying a new car, or owning a car at all, and compared the cost of around 2000 Euro annually for a new car with the cost of fares for trains, buses, and taxis. He reported being exceptionally objective and unemotional during the discussion, whereas Gina assessed her discussion style as more emotional and felt that she had exerted more influence over Michael than he on her. The tactics as recorded enable us to reconstruct the course of the discussion, which was assessed to be relatively fair and the outcome of which was ultimately satisfactory to both parties. Michael reported that he presented the facts as they appeared to him, whilst

he felt Gina built indirect coalitions by indicating the usefulness of the car for the children and by distorting the facts. Gina recorded the course of the conversation differently: After initially insisting on her position, she indicated seeking integrative solutions, whereas Michael withdrew from confrontation with her after expressing his wishes. The decision was reached to purchase a car during this conversation. Gina had won the argument.

On 28 August 1996, the cost of buying a car was again discussed. Both partners agreed, and felt happy during the conversation. Another conversation about the car was recorded the following day, and the mood of the conversation was described as pleasant. On 30 August 1996, Michael and Gina bought their new car, at a cost of 6300 Euro.

A few days later the couple again recorded discussions on buying the car, on selling the old car and on waiting impatiently for the documentation for the new car. A day later, the partners discussed the cost of registering their new car, and on 6 September 1996 they were able to register it officially. For the next three weeks there are further references to the sale of the old car, its price and the costs of officially de-registering it. After this the desires and concerns about the car disappear from the diaries.

In this instance, the questionnaire about relative influence, which couples completed alongside the diaries, is also revealing. At the start of the diary-keeping, and again after six months and at the end of the year, the partners were each asked, in the context of a hypothetical car purchase, who would express their wishes, who would collect the information, and who would make the final decision. Here, both Michael and Gina recorded that they would reach the decision together; conforming to stereotypes, Michael would gather information autonomously and then both partners would make a decision together, in accordance with a relationship-nurturing ideal. This evidence conflicts with that of the diaries, which shows that decisions about major purchases extend over long periods of time and are quite unsystematic, with chance disagreements frequently being thrown up and discussions being brief affairs interrupted by other topics or by one partner withdrawing from the confrontation. Gina had much more influence than is stereotypically the case, or than is indicated in either of their questionnaires, which tend to conform to a socially constructed view of what represents a relationship-nurturing ideal.

Peter and Mary Look for a Birthday Present for Their Son

Peter and Mary have been married for 17 years. Peter is 43, and Mary is 7 years younger. They live together with their 15-year-old son and 11-year-old daughter in a flat in a suburb of Vienna. Peter works for the Austrian Railways and Mary works part-time in a legal office. Both rate their rela-

tionship as very satisfactory. Both think that in general Peter takes the lead, and both describe themselves as a fairly traditional couple. The income of both partners is jointly managed.

Peter and Mary were looking for a birthday present for their son. They had to make a fairly straightforward decision, but in the course of discussions it led to disagreements and ultimately to an end that was not intended. The initial goal, of buying a birthday present, was not achieved.

On 27 October 1996 Peter and Mary spent about four hours with one another, during which time they spoke for about an hour about housework and Peter's visit to a model railway exhibition with their son. They also spoke angrily about their relationship and about their daughter, who felt that she was being treated unfairly. Mary, whom Peter describes as egoistic, was particularly annoyed because he had not listened to her opinion and had unilaterally spent around 170 Euro on a model train set for his collection, and had not bought a planned birthday present for their son costing around 80 Euro. Peter described Mary as narrow-minded. He admitted having taken an autonomous decision, but stated that the train he had bought was for himself and his son together. The discussion about the purchase of the model train was also brought up at lunch-time. One of the children raised the subject of model trains. The mood during the conversation was negative. Opinions differed as to whether the purchase was appropriate. In the joint discussion between Peter and Mary she felt that she had had no influence at all on the decision; Peter had decided on his own. He indicated that his influence over the decision had been around 60%, compared to Mary's 40%. Unlike Peter, Mary described the decision as unfair, concluding that he had acted against her expressed wishes and without seeking to get her agreement, and in addition he had all the benefit of this decision—a fact Peter agreed with in his diary.

Regarding the decision-making dynamic of 27 October 1996, Mary noted that she had threatened the withdrawal of resources, had repeatedly insisted on her opinion and had finally left the room. Peter recorded that Mary had expressed negative emotions, threatened, lied and tried to build coalitions with the children. After he had taken action, making no concession towards her point of view, she broke off the argument over the purchase. Peter recorded in his diary that he for his part had remained objective, had explained his decision to buy the train as a present for his son as well as for himself, and had openly presented the reasons for his actions. He too insisted on his point of view. Mary described Peter as dishonest, saying that he had reminded her of earlier favours she had received and made her feel guilty by doing so, and that he was ultimately also seeking to find coalition partners to justify his actions.

The model train was bought on 27 October 1996, for Peter's collection, it would appear. In fact, there are earlier references in the diary to discussions

about a model train, admittedly as a present for the son. On 15 August 1996, a bank holiday, the discussion about a suitable birthday present began. The couple spent ten hours together and spoke a lot with each other, discussing amongst other things a birthday party and a visit to friends. With regard to a birthday present, Peter and Mary were of quite different opinions. There were plans to buy some parts of a model railway. The cost was not to be more than 100 Euro. The conversation about the model railway lasted around five minutes and was not particularly pleasant. Peter accused Mary of using non-objective arguments and felt that she had dominated the discussion. Mary attributed 80% of the influence to herself, and 20% to Peter. Both partners believed that they had equal benefit from a present for their son. Both recorded that the discussion was ultimately not unfair, but the outcome pleased only Mary.

On 1 September 1996, Peter and Mary discussed housework and their relationship. They did not discuss the birthday present, but at lunch with the children they discussed buying a part of a model railway for Peter's collection. The cost of the part (11 Euro) was small. Peter and Mary spoke objectively about the purchase, even if Mary was somewhat more emotional than Peter. Whereas Peter attributed 70% of the influence and 90% of the benefit from the decision to himself, Mary felt that he had not only had more of the influence, but that he also had all the benefit.

Next day, Peter and Mary spent about 30 minutes together. They talked for a few minutes about pressures of work and complained about not having enough time for each other. The start of the school term was briefly mentioned, and the birthday present was again discussed. Mary felt that Peter wanted to spend too much money and this led to a disagreement. The mood of the conversation worsened in comparison to the day before. Mary recorded that she had argued non-objectively, had hardly had any influence on the discussion and, compared to Peter, had hardly had any benefit from it. She felt the course of the discussion and the outcome were unfair, and she was unhappy for that reason. Peter's diary for the day has no entry about this conflict.

Up until 27 October 1996 neither Peter nor Mary record further discussions about the present for their son. The matter of the model railway—which at one time had been considered as an appropriate and not too expensive present—was settled by an autonomous decision on Peter's part. He bought himself a present and the birthday present for his son had to be accommodated around that.

Tony, Helen, and the Purchase of a Guitar

Tony and Helen have been married for 16 years and live with their two children, the younger of whom is 6 years old, in Vienna. Helen (32) attended

a vocational school and is a housewife. Tony (38) is an academic and works in a state school. The net household income, which is jointly managed, is between 2500 and 3000 Euro per month. Tony and Helen describe their relationship as very satisfactory, more dominated by Helen, and modern with respect to gender roles.

In the diaries of this couple there was a series of disagreements surrounding the purchase of a guitar for Tony. After a discussion, where the couple could not agree, Tony decided autonomously to buy the guitar, although at first he did not carry out his decision. He sought to gain Helen's agreement. The following day there was again a disagreement. Almost two months later Tony bought the guitar, without Helen's agreement. Following that there was a renewed argument.

On Sunday 4 August 1996, the couple recorded spending about an hour together and talking for about 20 minutes. Helen did not feel particularly good about their relationship. By contrast, Tony felt relatively happy about the relationship, but somewhat constrained. Alongside a discussion about leisure time, they talked about the cost of buying a guitar. During this discussion Tony was resting and Helen was doing the housework. Tony wanted to buy a guitar costing around 1000 Euro for himself, and had already gathered information about various guitars. Helen was not particularly interested in the topic, and had little information or knowledge of the subject. The mood of the conversation was described by both as moderately pleasant. Whereas Helen was relatively emotionless, Tony was very emotional during the discussion. Tony had more influence in this discussion than Helen (she rated it at 100%, he rated it at 90%). The decision to buy a guitar was postponed.

In the conversation, which both partners described as completely unfair, Tony began by presenting the objective basis for the purchase and expressing his wishes. Helen remained insistent that she did not agree with the cost involved in buying the guitar. After this, Tony sought to use objective arguments to change Helen's point of view. She reacted by withdrawing, and ending the conversation. Both partners' diaries agree about the tactics used by each person during the conversation. Helen was not at all satisfied with the outcome of the conversation; Tony was also dissatisfied.

The following day, Tony and Helen indicated that they did not talk to one another. Helen felt only moderately good about the relationship, not very empowered and rather constrained. She felt that she put more into the relationship than Tony. Tony felt happy overall, praised the relationship and felt that he contributed more to it than Helen. On this day he also reported having taken an autonomous decision to buy the guitar, costing 1000 Euro, without Helen's agreement.

A day later, the topic of the guitar purchase was raised alongside topics of housework, personal feelings, and the relationship. Although the partners

felt good during the discussions and indicated that there was agreement, the mood worsened during the argument about the guitar. The conflict took place with the children present, while Helen was doing housework and Tony indicated he was arranging a leisure activity. The conversation lasted for around five to seven minutes. Helen began the discussion about the guitar, although she still indicated that the topic was not important to her.

On this occasion she discussed less objectively than he did, and more emotionally. According to both partners' records, Helen had 10% of the influence and Tony 90%. Whereas Tony felt that the decision-making process and the result were extremely fair, Helen felt that the outcome was unfair and the process itself only moderately fair. She had no benefit from the decision and felt that he had all the benefit. He felt that Helen had at least 10% of the benefit from the outcome, although he indicated the same distribution of benefit in the final decision.

The dynamics of the discussion, as revealed through the record of tactics employed, were as follows: Helen began the discussion with negative emotions, to which Tony reacted by being more insistent. She then attempted to form a coalition with the children against her partner. The disagreement, which both described as a value conflict, ended with Tony insisting on his opinion. Whereas he was very satisfied with the outcome of the conversation, Helen was not at all satisfied.

Not until two months later, on 11 October 1996, did the topic of the guitar reappear in the notes recorded by the couple. Tony recorded that he had carried out his autonomously reached decision. He had bought a guitar costing 910 Euro. Next day, Helen initiated a discussion about the purchase. Although she discussed more objectively and he more emotionally, she indicated that she became very annoyed. By contrast, Tony appeared to have been completely satisfied: The decision had come out in his favour.

A few days later, the couple recorded having a five-minute conversation. They talked about their children's schoolwork and how Tony was feeling. Both indicated they felt good about their relationship. In the subsequent days and weeks there was no further mention of the purchase of the guitar in the diary records. The topic appeared to be closed. Tony, who was indicated by both partners to have less power in the relationship, had carried out his egoistic desire to buy a guitar and carried out the decision taken over two months earlier. He had sought, but not obtained, the agreement of his wife. The guitar was important enough to him to complete the purchase despite Helen's dominance advantage and her opposition to the decision.

This case reveals processes leading ultimately to an autonomous decision. In contrast to an individual, fully autonomous decision, Tony sought to take the opinion of his partner into consideration and to win her approval. In this instance, however, he did not succeed in this. The benefit from this

decision clearly lay with the active partner, in this case Tony, who wanted to fulfil a wish he had. Whilst the records indicate that the clarity and strength of his wish were apparent, the active partner was not able to assert himself at first and even at a later stage he was not able to secure the agreement of his partner. Tony chose to ignore the fact that his partner was not in agreement with the purchase and was not satisfied with the outcome of the numerous discussions, and bought what he wanted.

FROM DESIRES, DISCUSSIONS, AND DISAGREEMENTS TO DECISIONS

The three decision-making processes selected from the recordings in the Vienna Diary Study show clearly that, in private households, partners do not sit round a table together to reach a decision, thereby freeing themselves up from other tasks and weighing up objective arguments for or against a particular alternative. Decisions are taken, but it only becomes clear in retrospect that desires have led to discussions, and these have led to disagreements, which have finally ended with the taking of a decision. A clear awareness of the need to take a decision and a direct focus on desires, alternatives, and criteria would appear to be the exception rather than the rule, even for economic decisions taken in the home.

In one instance it is apparent that decisions that are finally taken autonomously by one partner do not follow an autonomous pattern throughout: one partner repeatedly tried to get the agreement of the other, discussions were begun and then broken off, and only when no agreement could be reached did the partner make a decision to purchase autonomously. From another case it is clear that decision-makers may change their objectives over a period of time: whilst at the start of the discussion about a present for their son both partners were pursuing the same objective, the objective for the man changed during the period when alternatives for presents were being considered, so that in the end he was organising a present for himself and the original objective became lost. To sum up, these case studies are powerful evidence that decisions are not isolated incidents, but are instead woven into the complexity of everyday life: When an economic decision is being made, various other disagreements are brought out, and other everyday activities intrude repeatedly into the foreground. All three cases also show variations in the subjective description of the reality of what went on between the partners. Differences in perception and in recall lead to slightly different descriptions of joint experiences that are only a few hours old.

Social scientific methods applied to the study of decision-making must take account of these insights. These phenomena, so apparent from the case studies, cannot be captured in structured oral or written interviews.

To understand decision-making in private households, it is not only the research method that requires careful selection. We must also determine who the decision-makers are, and what kind of relationship they have. In romantic relationships, the goal of the partners when making a decision may not just lie in making the best possible choice from the given alternatives; promoting, or at least sustaining, the quality of the relationship can often be the overriding objective, leading to a position where not only the wishes of the individual, but also those of the partner must be taken into consideration. It therefore follows that the dynamics of decision-making depend to a large extent on the relationship between the partners.

Further definition is required to determine what is understood by decision-making. In private households a number of tasks crop up that are rarely tackled in a structured manner. What do the partners discuss, which problems lead to disagreements, and how can decisions be classified? Before decision-making in close relationships can be described, we must first address the issue of close relationships in general and the decision-making process in particular.

We start with an outline of what is understood by love, a summary of the psychology of money, and a description of everyday matters. What is love, which brings a partner to the point of setting up home with someone and jointly tackling everyday tasks over a number of years? What is money, and what is the significance of money in romantic relationships? And finally, what do we understand by everyday matters, those things that are ever-present and yet appear so unprepossessing, grey, and monotonous? Following this, we embark on an analysis of close relationships and offer a taxonomy of decision-making, before finally studying decision-making in close relationships.

CHAPTER TWO

Love, Money, and Everyday Matters

Close relationships are based on the love each partner has for the other. At the start of a relationship, this is most often reciprocal love. We aspire to a relationship built on love. If the relationship lasts, life “in a shared home” often comes about as a matter of course, punctuated with smaller and sometimes greater periods of excitement and often without particular incidents over long periods of time, resulting in correspondingly little attention being paid to what is actually happening.

Many activities and goals will be experienced and valued similarly by the partners. Some of their wishes and intentions, on the other hand, result in disagreements, which need to be settled and so lead to decision-making. If partners more or less consciously take decisions together, then they not only have to clarify their current egoistic goals and identify what the available alternative options might be, but they also have to take account of their partner’s ideas and find a satisfactory solution together.

This book is concerned with disagreements and decisions in private households, mainly but not exclusively concerning financial matters. Financial matters are often the source of disagreements and of intense conflicts, which can call the whole relationship into question. Decisions regarding the joint budget in private households attract the attention not only of the clinically orientated family psychologist and the social psychologist, but also of the economist, because private households hold sway over a significant amount of a country’s national income. Non-rational, or sub-optimal, decisions can significantly affect the whole of the economy.

The aim of this work is to understand how partners in close relationships shape their everyday life together, and particularly how they handle money. Love, money, and everyday matters are key concepts that pervade the whole of this book.

LOVE

Definition of Love

Much has been written about the loved one and about love itself: in distressed, mesmerised, mournful, ironic, and wholly cynical tones, and in tones that are objective and rational. Whenever this most highly sung emotion is put into words, the descriptions offered fail to capture that feeling which can make one blind and which is stronger than reason, disdaining to do battle with it. Whenever reason seeks to get a grip on love, love escapes like a brightly coloured bird which alights, wanting nothing to do with rights, law or power, and flies off if someone tries to catch hold of it.

At one time it fell to the grandfather to find a suitable marriage partner for his grandson, and his choice of bride was guided by economic considerations. Nowadays the choice of partner is freely made by the partner him- or herself, and love has become the basis for the partnership. Love has thereby become the basis for the most elemental of society's micro-systems. It is that condition which is most intensively sought after as we escape into the private sphere, and which seems to last for ever shorter periods of time (Duck, 1986; Hinde, 1997; Hyde, 1993; Piel, 1983).

What follows is an overview of the scientific focus on one of the most glittering phenomena of social psychology, love. No differentiation is made between love and being in love, although it is clear that the two phenomena are different even if the boundaries between the two are often blurred.

First, it seems prudent to draw together various findings and theories from social psychology and economics. This area has already been acknowledged by the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Economics to Gary S. Becker, in recognition of his work on the private household, the marriage market, and love as an economic good. In social psychology, the language used to describe love is scientific and objective, and in economics it is highly formal. Here we seek to substitute this often abstract formulaic language with a more discursive style, but nevertheless to provide a picture of the scientific preoccupation with love that is largely in contrast to the picture of love drawn by writers and poets.

The phenomenon of "love" has been addressed by various branches of science. Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and economists have tried to relate love to their particular "market". In particular, Becker's writings (1974, 1981, 1982; see Bolle, 1987, 1992) on family economics and his conception of altruism or love have provoked much sober and spirited discussion. Here love is defined as a resource, with which business can be concluded after periods of consideration that have been as rational as possible. The economically orientated construct of exchange theory is at the root of even the most well-known social psychological theories about

interpersonal interaction, and therefore also at the heart of theories about the interplay between lovers or loving partners (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961/1974; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Put briefly, individuals sustain and intensify interactions with those people where the interaction brings a reward. Material and non-material resources are offered to those people who guarantee a similar pay-back, and ultimately love is bestowed on the “partnership option” that offers more benefits than the others.

Some people express concern that love is seen as an economic force (Fromm, 1977); others see this as an opportunity in longer-term relationships (Lederer & Jackson, 1972). Fromm (1977, p. 17 ff.) writes: “In a culture where the sales mentality is dominant and where material success is given exaggerated value, there is little reason to be surprised if human love relationships operate on the same principles which govern the market in goods and the labour market.” Reducing love to a business transaction is, however, seen to be a major mistake by Fromm. By contrast, Lederer and Jackson (1972, p. 203 ff.) write that “dealings (between partners) form an essential part of a well-functioning marriage”. Pleasing actions that one partner carries out must be responded to immediately. In an ideal arrangement, the response may not need to be demanded immediately, but this deferment can carry with it “the seeds of self-destruction”.

From a medical point of view, love is interesting because it is said to have a preventative and therapeutic effect in respect of various illnesses. The loss of love can lead to depression and can bring on physical illnesses in the organs, sometimes causing the patient deadly torment and even in some instances bringing about death. The Italian weekly magazine *Europeo* has dedicated a front cover and several pages to this theme, which is an indication that everyone is aware of the power of love to act as a therapeutic and dangerous drug (Ferreiri, 1991; Rosso 1991; Vertone, 1991). Love, attachment, and intimacy contribute to mental health (Reis & Patrick, 1996). Being in love correlates with neurochemical changes in the brain (Liebowitz, 1983) and has a positive effect on the immune system of lovers (Siegel, 1986). People who have never been in love and those whose love relationships have been unsuccessful complain more often than those in love of minor physical ailments, colds, and flu symptoms (Duck, 1986). Love and intimacy affect the self, and people who experience love are affirmed in their self-esteem (Shaver & Hazan, 1993). Health risks related to loss of love have been researched by Verbrugge (1979) and discussed by Raschke (1987). Cobb and Jones (1984) discuss the connection between loving relationships and social awareness, as well as love, intimacy, and health. Lynch (1977) proved that emotional attachment and the stroking of patients with heart disease can reduce the incidence of irregular heart-beats. In Stroebe and Stroebe (1983) we read that separation from a partner through death or other causes can bring about health problems, particularly in men.