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Women and power: a theoretical approach using the example of copreneurial businesses

G rard Hirigoyen¹ and Am lie Villeger¹

ABSTRACT Despite the gradual recognition of strategic issues related to the integration of women into the economy, female entrepreneurship continues to receive little attention. Family business research attributes this situation to a lack of recognition given to the (decisive) role of women in these organizations. However, there is one type of family governance that formally acknowledges the man/woman combination: the copreneurial company. Copreneurs are couples who run a business together. This theoretical article highlights the role of women in the copreneurial context by distinguishing between formal and informal power- the latter being primarily held by women, but which is no less influential. The distribution of power reduces opposition costs between partners and the social costs of non-compliance, and improves the clarity of the entrepreneurial structure. Moreover, it increases satisfaction and a feeling of equality between the partners. These results can be generalized and shed light on the role of women in other entrepreneurial and social contexts. This article is published as part as part of a collection on the role of women in management and business.

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Introduction

One evening, President Obama and his wife Michelle decide to go out for a casual dinner in a modest restaurant. Once seated, the restaurant owner asks the President's security team if he could speak to the First Lady in private. The presidential couple agrees and Michelle talks to the owner. When his wife returns, President Obama asks what the conversation was about. She explains that he is a former boyfriend with whom she had a romantic relationship as a teenager. President Obama says, "If you had married him, you would be running this charming little restaurant", to which Michelle replies, "No, if I had married him, he would be President of the United States!" (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/16/funny-story-the-obamas-go_n_884146.html).

Although apocryphal, the story is a pertinent illustration of how women can exert their influence from behind the scenes, and tends to confirm the popular adage "behind every great/successful man there stands a woman".¹ Moreover, we should not forget that it was Michelle Obama who encouraged her hitherto uninterested husband to enter politics, and who, following her success in studying law at Harvard, gave up a promising career to support him.

This urban legend can be analyzed from two angles. The first, which gives least credit to the woman, sees her role as that of "the wife of" someone. Her destiny lies in sacrificing her own success for the success of her husband. The second is more optimistic—and more egalitarian—in that it emphasizes the decisive influence that a woman can have in the couple, and emphasizes the primacy of the conjugal partnership in value creation. A similar position is taken by Noland and Moran (2016) in a recent study. They report that firms that have no women on their senior management team are 15% less profitable than those in which women make up 30% of executives, while this lack of gender diversity emerges as the principal factor affecting business performance. Furthermore, a report by the McKinsey Global Institute (2015)² estimated that 12 trillion dollars could be added to world gross domestic product by 2025 through promoting gender equality/ the role of women. Similarly, a study by the Peterson Institute for International Economics (2016)³ demonstrates that the presence of women in corporate management bodies can improve performance. In addition, statistics from Dow Jones Venture Source (2012)⁴ show that having more female managers in a company creates value.

Yet despite the growing recognition of the strategic challenges related to their integration into the economy, the role of women has received little attention, including in the field of family businesses. As long ago as 1990, Salganicoff stressed that while the literature on family business was in its infancy, that of women in these enterprises was still in the making. Later, in 2002, Fitzgerald and Muske called for future research to focus more on the contribution of women in such companies. Finally, in 2010, Blenkinsop and Owens again noted that the role of spouses had only been explored to a limited extent in both entrepreneurship research and in the literature on family businesses.

The first contribution of this article is therefore to examine a question that has received little attention in the academic literature: that of the role of women in the workplace, and in particular the context of copreneurial governance. Copreneurs are couples in a marital or pseudo-marital relationship, who "jointly own and operate a business or otherwise share ownership, responsibility, risk, and management of a business" (Barnett and Barnett, 1988). This marital and entrepreneurial association, "as old as the family" (Marshack, 1993), symbolized by the American "mom and pop" shops, remains rooted in contemporary society. In the United States, Muske (quoted in FSBS, 2008⁵) estimated that of the 22 million small businesses, million were run by a

couple. And the trend is inexorable,⁶ to the extent that the family business has been seen as the fastest-growing form of governance (Marshack, 1999). Marshack (1998) estimated that the number of individual entrepreneurs who were subsequently joined by their wife or husband had increased by 57% between 1985 and 1994.

The study of copreneurial governance is particularly rich for understanding the power relations between men and women. In practice, researchers frequently promote the idea that female "nebulosity" (Danes and Olson, 2003) could be linked to the hidden or invisible position of women in the company, particularly family businesses (Epstein, 1971; Dumas, 1989; Marshack, 1994; Cole, 1997; Fitzgerald and Muske, 2002; Blenkinsopp and Owens, 2010) where they play an important, if not decisive, role while their participation is rarely acknowledged.

However, for copreneurs, the woman's position at the head of the business is officially acknowledged, to the same degree as that of her male partner. This formal recognition as a professional partner at the head of the company should increase her legitimacy and influence. This form of governance may even be the source of a recursive relation with the promotion of gender equality. Not only would this benefit from changing attitudes and recognition of the role of women in the labour market (Maas and Diederichs, 2007; Stewart-Gross and Gross, 2007), it would also encourage gender equality/ the role of women by helping to reconcile work and family life. In practice, the copreneurship is thought to offer a rare degree of organizational freedom (Smith, 2000; Stewart-Gross and Gross, 2007; Brannon *et al.*, 2013; Dahl *et al.*, 2014) that makes it possible to achieve the sought-after balance between individual, family and career aspirations (Jaffe, 1990; Smith, 2000; Charles, 2006; Maas and Diederichs, 2007; Millman and Martin, 2007; Harris *et al.*, 2010). It offers a level of flexibility that is impossible to achieve in any other form of entrepreneurial organization (Brannon *et al.*, 2013). Renewed interest in quality of life, family unity and the roles of worker, spouse, parent and individual are key factors that explain the choice of this form of governance (Moitoza, 1997).

The copreneurship therefore seems, at first glance, to bring women back into the limelight, offering them (albeit shared) formal recognition at the head of the company (Hirigoyen and Villéger, 2015a) and fostering gender equality.

Nevertheless, even in this field of research, studies that emphasize the importance of the role of women at the side of their partners remain rare. One example is Hedberg and Danes (2012), who suggest that future research should focus more on the analysis of how copreneurs create equitable power structures and collaborative interactions.

Furthermore, Fitzgerald and Muske (2002) argue that the lack of studies on the copreneurship appears to be mainly due to a lack of recognition of women's work in society in general. Therefore, even in a context where officially, it is recognized, paradoxically very few women are in the limelight. Here again, they remain in the shadows, whether in the literature or in business (Marshack, 1993). The principal aim of this article is therefore to respond to academic demands that advocate paying greater attention to the dynamics of the distribution of power between men and women—in the copreneurial context in particular—and in business in general.

De Bruin and Lewis (2004) introduce an interesting nuance into their discussion on the invisibility of women in business: they refer to women "who play, or are seen as playing" a supporting role. The nuance is important, and has significant implications for governance. Female copreneurs can be seen as exerting an auxiliary, subordinate power, while in reality they hold significant policy-making and operational powers. Does the invisibility of female copreneurs take away their power? In other words, is invisible power synonymous with no power?

The nuance brings additional theoretical value to this article. The power relations between men and women can be understood from a fresh perspective, notably in terms of the distinction between formal and informal power. This distinction makes it possible to highlight the key role that women can play in business in general, and in the copreneurship in particular. While formal and informal power coexist in all organizations (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977), for Mintzberg (1983), it is the informal power holders who are the principal “holders of influence”. It is important, therefore, to clearly distinguish between visibility and influence (Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990). Even if women are less visible than men in businesses, does this mean that they are any less influential? Finally, by analogy with Ponthieu and Caudill (1993) who asked “Who is the boss?”, the contemporary question regarding the place of women in business seems to be: Who is the real boss?

It is this new question that this study addresses, by taking the specific example of the copreneurship. Our approach is based on a rigorous methodology. First, we examine the current literature on the concept of power, and the role of women in the copreneurial company. This highlights the lack of clear link in the academic literature between the invisibility of women and their influence resulting from their informal power. Next, a set of propositions are proposed to fill this gap. These proposals are discussed in the light of the current literature, and their theoretical and operational implications. They serve as a basis for the construction of a conceptual model of the organization of copreneurial power. Finally, consideration is given to the generalization of the propositions and the associated model.

Theoretical background for the power of copreneurial women

Two theoretical approaches are taken: research into the invisibility of women in the copreneurial business (Marshack, 1994; Poza and Messer, 2001; Danes and Olson, 2003; De Bruin and Lewis, 2004) and research into power (March and Simon, 1958; Crozier and Friedberg, 1977; Mintzberg, 1983). The motivation for this choice was to be able to show that while the informal power held by the female copreneur may be evidence of her lack of visibility, it is not, however, evidence of her lack of influence.

The invisibility of women in the copreneurship. In Western societies, the cult of the entrepreneur sees the man as a hero who braves the horrors of the business world (Ahl, 2006; Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson, 2007), and who consequently leaves the woman who supports him (in life or in business) in obscurity. Convention dictates that there is only room for one person, the man, at the head of the family business (Smith, 2014).

Until very recently, even in the eyes of the law, wives lived in the shadow of their husbands.⁷ For this reason, historical work on the role of women in the workplace has emphasized the contrast between the importance of women’s contribution to the economy and their lack of visibility and institutional recognition (Lanza, 2009). Women’s work is invisible, in other words not statutorily recognized and uncompensated, officially considered as “non-work”, whether at home or in the family business.

Domestic work undertaken by women (preparation of meals, taking care of the house and laundry, education and child care, helping older members of the family, financial and administrative household management and so on) is either barely acknowledged, or not at all (Voydanoff, 1990). This domestic work is unpaid. Yet the more they invest in the home, the more they reduce expenditure.

Similarly, in the family business the work of wives is frequently unpaid or underpaid (Rosenblatt *et al.*, 1985; Rowe and Hong,

2000). In the study by Danes and Olson (2003) for example, only 47% of women working in the family business were paid. In addition, those that are paid receive less than they would earn for the same job in the labour market (Rowe and Hong, 2000).

The same situation is found in the copreneurial literature. The female copreneur remains an invisible woman (Lyman, 1988; Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990; Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990; Salganicoff, 1990; Marshack, 1994; Poza and Messer, 2001; Danes and Olson, 2003; De Bruin and Lewis, 2004 and so on). The role of copreneur wife is regarded as “unique but normal” and “central but often invisible” (Poza and Messer, 2001). Either we do not see them at all, or we see them as inferior to the men of the family (Nelton, 1986; Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990; Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990). Women take on the role of the silent or discrete partner (Ponthieu and Caudill, 1993).

This invisibility is consistently seen in small family businesses (Labardin and Robic, 2008), particularly among traders, artisans and independent workers (Auvolat and Mayère, 1984; Zarca, 1990; Richomme, 2000; Bertaux-Wiame, 2004). The most persistent stereotype is the image of the female copreneur who takes care of the accounts in a back room (Dumas, 1998). Epstein (1971) offers an interesting insight, arguing that the role of women is not only less visible, but also less glamorous, and that their tasks “banish them to obscurity”.⁸ In the study by Bessière and Gollac (2007) on the issue of gender in the families of entrepreneurs, the authors conclude that women’s jobs are often defined as “set back from those of men”.

When O’Connor *et al.* (2006) surveyed couples who had co-founded a business, half said that, despite their joint efforts, their business was still seen by outsiders as having been founded by one person: the husband.

One of the reasons for this lack of recognition and visibility may lie in the fact that the work of women within a family business only offers partial autonomy. Scott and Tilly (1987) argue that the two factors that decisively influence the relation between work and women are earning a wage, and working outside the family. However, women who work in a family business, sometimes lack both of these factors and always lack at least one. Moreover, the primacy of the traditional distribution of roles within the family has resulted in the failure to understand and acknowledge the work done by women in the family business (Lyman *et al.*, 1985). Female participation remains in the shadow in the gender division of labour (Bertaux-Wiame, 2004).

Even in an entrepreneurial configuration that in principle places men and women on an equal footing, the literature shows that flagrant inequality remains, and that the female copreneur herself is changing, often in the shadow of her husband.

However, a more optimistic view of the situation draws upon theoretical developments concerning power. Too often, common sense tends to associate a lack of visibility in the company with an absence of power. However, visibility and influence should not be confused (Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990). While visibility is formal and official, influence tends to be informal, unofficial, and often operates behind the scenes. It is influence, more than visibility, which is both the support and the purpose of power. Theorists can provide valuable insight into these nuances.

Formal and informal power. Power is the ability of certain individuals or groups to act on other individuals or groups (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). In this sense, power does not exist in itself, but only in relation to certain people, or groups of people, and relative to certain activities (Jameux, 1994). It is both relative and relational. It must necessarily be understood in terms of the relationship between actors, and not in terms of the

attributes of actors. It can only manifest through its exercise in a relationship that brings together two or more actors who must depend on each other (Dahl, 1968).

According to Russell (1938), power means “to be able to”. It is therefore “the production of intended effects”. Similarly, Dahl (1968) sees it as the ability to change the behaviour of another, “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do”.⁹ More generally, power can be equated with the ability to intervene in the decision process (March and Simon, 1958) or the ability to determine, direct or control the behaviour of those we have a relationship with (French and Raven, 1959). Mintzberg (1983) uses the terms “power” and “influence” interchangeably and argues that holders of informal power are “influencers”. He understands power as the ability to produce or modify organizational results or effects, and ultimately sees it as a synthesis of the above definitions, applied to the context of organizations. He argues that it rests on five pillars (control of a resource; technical know-how; a body of knowledge; a legal prerogative; or proximity to someone holding one of the first four pillars). Finally, the Webster dictionary (1996) defines power as “the fact of having control, authority or influence”.

All of these definitions, and notably the reference to influence, highlight the weaknesses of Taylorism, in which power is fully merged with the formal analysis of functions and technical capabilities, in such a way that the company’s organigram and resulting hierarchical structure constitute a map of absolute power. This led Petit (1985) to criticize classical models as overly locked-in to formal concerns, and unable to account for the actual operation of the organization. It is true that power has both formal and informal dimensions, and human relations researchers were the first to recognize it (Mayo, 1933). According to this school of thought, informal power is the expression of the resistance of the human factor to formal power: on the one hand, there is a “logic of feelings” in human relations between members of an organization, which is embodied in the informal structure; on the other hand, there is a “logic of cost and efficiency” in the formal structure, which corresponds to the desire of management to control and streamline the various risks and uncertainties inherent in production. In this way, informal power emerges outside the hierarchy.

Sociologists extended these arguments to show that not only are formal and informal power interdependent, but also one that necessarily springs from the other (Gouldner, 1954; March and Simon, 1958; Crozier, 1964). Everywhere, regardless of the type of organization, formal and informal regulations are inseparable (Reynaud, 1989); processes of influence in all directions and at any time develop at the very heart of the relations established by the organigram (French and Raven, 1959). In this way, informal power creates a clandestine life (Goffman, 1961) or a genuinely marginal system (McCleery, 1957) within the organization, which interacts with the formal organization. This power structure, which exists in parallel to the organigram, is actually a second organigram that corresponds to the real relations between individuals and groups found in the daily running of the organization. Crozier and Friedberg (1977) call this the “concrete action system”. Even excessive formalization does not prevent the emergence of informal power. Rather, it fosters it by making its development all the more necessary (Crozier, 1964). Crozier and Friedberg (1995) reverses the relationship, explaining that the formal structure is not simply the expression of efficiency, but that it is rooted in the informal structure. According to him, the formalization of the organization is only the visible part of an iceberg of effective control. It is necessarily the product of a mixture of formal requirements and informal processes; formal prescriptions are rooted in a power structure, exchange processes,

and informal negotiations to which they, in turn, provide arguments and resources.

The analysis of organizations has therefore been divided into two structures: a formal, codified structure, and an unofficial, informal structure that is a function of a proliferation of practices, unauthorized (or even clandestine and covert) interactions, and relationships that form a second, parallel reality in opposition to the first (Dessingues, 1999). In this way, some sources of power are under the control of the established authority: these relate to regulations, management, and control (Albouy, 1978), while others are more elusive and rooted in “gray areas” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). The deep structures of “clandestine management” coexist with the official structures shown in the organigram (Moulet, 1992).

The invisibility of the female copreneur is widely acknowledged in academic research. However, the implications of this invisibility in terms of power have rarely been examined, while theories of power appear to be able to reposition the woman as a decision-maker, on an equal footing with her husband.

To contribute to bridging this gap, we formulate a set of propositions concerning the power and influence relations of women copreneurs.

Propositions and discussion

Danes (2006) argues that the literature has paid insufficient attention to spouses who do not play a formal role in the company. According to De Bruin and Lewis (2004), the hidden contribution of women’s work should be recognized as a key contribution to the family business. While these authors point a finger at the lack of knowledge about the role of women in family and copreneurial businesses, no link has been made between their “hidden” role and theoretical developments on informal power. The following propositions make it possible to investigate this link.

P1. Copreneurial power can be divided into formal and informal power.

P2. Formal copreneurial power is held by the man, while informal power is held by the woman.

P3. The informal power of the female copreneur is as influential, if not more so, than the formal power of the man.

Although power interactions are a fundamental dimension of the decision-making process, they are difficult to understand (Fletcher, 2010), particularly in family businesses (Helmlé *et al.*, 2011). These interactions are even more complex when the power must be shared. Is it efficient for a company to have two leaders? In his book, *The Physiology of Marriage*, Balzac (1829) asks, “That there is something ridiculous in the wish that one and the same thoughts should control two wills?” Transposing the question to the entrepreneurial context, is there not something ridiculous in wanting one company to be controlled by two wills? In the end, can power be shared? (Cisneros and Deschamps, 2013).

Gersick *et al.* (1997) are dubious, and underline that the egalitarian transmission of property rights to siblings can be perceived as unfair if one of them judges that they deserve more than the others, notably because of their involvement and investment in the company.

But, for the vast majority of authors, dual governance can increase efficiency (Ensley *et al.*, 2003, 2006). The following propositions test the positive consequences of sharing formal and informal forms of power.

P4. Sharing copreneurial power between formal and informal forms improves the clarity of the entrepreneurial structure.

P5. Sharing copreneurial power between formal and informal forms reduces opposition costs between partners.

P6. *Sharing copreneurial power between formal and informal forms reduces the costs of social non-compliance.*

P7. *Sharing copreneurial power between formal and informal forms fosters the creation of informal relational norms.*

P8. *Sharing copreneurial power between formal and informal forms fosters the satisfaction of both spouses.*

P9. *Sharing copreneurial power between formal power and informal forms fosters a sense of equality between partners.*

These nine propositions are discussed in the light of the literature.

P1. *Copreneurial power can be divided into formal and informal power*

Formal power is power that is based on property rights, and powers granted formally by law or by company statutes (Sigelman and Dometrius, 1988). Informal power results from intrinsic qualities (charisma, authority, discernment, restraint, diplomacy and so on) rather than formal edicts (Cisneros and Deschamps, 2013). It relies on relational, rather than statutory norms (Calabro and Mussolino, 2013) and is based on informal relational contracts (Macneil, 1980, 2000, 2003). It corresponds to what happens backstage, rather than frontstage, in the social space (Goffman, 1973).

This necessary distinction between formal and informal, and structural and relational, was highlighted in 1987 by Szinovacz. It distinguishes between power structures (linked to hierarchy and status), and power interactions (linked to negotiation, strategies of influence, and conflict management process).¹⁰ Subsequently, it has been reprised in the literature on couples, family businesses and copreneurs. With respect to couples, Komter (1989) identifies two types of power: “manifest” and “latent”. Similarly, Danes and Olson (2003) use the distinction to highlight the nebulous role of the woman in the family business. Finally, Hedberg and Danes (2012) draw upon it to highlight formal and informal power mechanisms between copreneurs. The copreneurship is particularly conducive to the development of informal contracts. First, because they are notably found between individuals who maintain long-term personal and professional relationships, underpinned by mutual expectations (Macneil, 1980, 2000, 2003). Then, because informal power may also be exercised outside the context of the business. Few strategic decisions are taken in a purely economic framework (Andrews, 1971; Chrisman *et al.*, 2003). The copreneurship fosters a form of decision-making that is influenced by the discussions and exchanges that take place between spouses outside the business context (Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990; Philbrick and Fitzgerald, 2007).

P2. *Formal copreneurial power is held by the man, while informal power is held by the woman.*

Both theoretical and empirical studies show that the dual governance revolves around pairings in which one of the two individuals takes a supporting role. Although actual numbers are rare, the study by Pratt (2009) shows that in 72.7% of cases men hold formal decision-making powers. Similarly, of the 24 copreneur couples studied by Firkin *et al.* (2003),¹¹ 21 gave the man the primary role. In general, the entrepreneurial literature has traditionally presented a business model centered on the man,¹² while the female entrepreneur is seen as an exception (Ahl, 2006). The woman more often takes a supporting role (Dupuis and de Bruin, 2004), while the man is considered the official leader. Although often tacit, the usual assumption is that “It’s *his* business” (Dumas, 1998). The wife, in turn, assumes an “auxiliary” role (De Bruin and Lewis, 2004) or is an auxiliary (Lespagnol, 1997). “When asked what was their formal title in the business, copreneurial husbands would state “owner”, “president”, and even “co-owner”. Their wives, on the other hand,

would state their title as “secretary,” “bookkeeper,” or “treasurer” (Marshack, 1998: 101).

P3. *The informal power of the female copreneur is as influential, if not more so, than the formal power of the man.*

In the family business, there is a gap between the degree of visibility of the wife, and her degree of influence (Poza and Messer, 2001). Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt (1990) show that power and influence in family businesses are often held by women, who are family members but who have no role or official title in the company. With respect to copreneurs, Marshack (1994) argues that even if women are invisible in terms of power, they are nonetheless vital to the efficient operation of the copreneurship. Copreneur wives play a key role in the continuity of familial and entrepreneurial governance systems (Poza and Messer, 2001). Finally, according to Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt (1990), “the influence of these women, although often pervasive, has been underestimated by business consultants, by families, and even by the women themselves”. The exercise of informal power is therefore not incompatible with the presence of real power held by female copreneurs.

With respect to the strength of female copreneurial power, the arguments put forward by Lemaire (1979) are particularly illustrative. He explains that the most effective power is often hidden:

“One of the most important findings concerning marital power relations concerns how they are almost always hidden, denied or reversed. The declaration of power is the exception. In general, the dominant member, the one who defines the laws, who holds most of the authority and decision-making power, makes sure that it is hidden. By averting attention, they humor their partner. They also prevent any uprising that challenges their own dominance and effectively protect their real power. If the reality of the power they have is perceived, it causes a response from the protagonist that, usually, leads to a lost battle [...] in other words, we rarely observe practical examples of hidden, or denied power that appear otherwise [...]. This is undoubtedly one of the most constant laws of relationships. Does it contradict the normal functioning of society and huge groups? [...] It seems clear that authority is no longer exercised in the same way as a few years ago, either in civil society or in the family: the demonstration of power that we see today often tends to lead to challenges that undermine it: the affirmation of power has acquired a provocative significance. To be maintained, deft authority remains veiled, modest. [...] To avoid being attacked, authority claims to be liberal, and even without power.”

As an extension of this idea Amblard *et al.* (1996) consider that “playing by hiding the game triggers new opportunities and other opportunities to play that restructure previous relationships”. Finally, in the domain of the family business, Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt (1990) argue that it is comfortable to wield behind the scenes an unacknowledged power. (Heath and Ciscel, 1988).

Women in general, and the female copreneur in particular, understand the game and the challenges of this hidden power. By remaining in the shadows, her governance is all the more effective.

The suppression of the female copreneur is pushed to the limit if she disengages from professional life to become more involved in family matters. The commitment and support of the entrepreneur’s spouse plays a decisive role in the company’s performance by influencing attitudes, motivation, and the resources that are available to the entrepreneur (Poza and Messer, 2001). The spouse has the power to significantly impact

both family and business dynamics (Van Auken and Werbel, 2006). The more the man seeks to invest in his professional life, the more he needs the support of his wife. The woman has discretionary power to authorize or sanction the professional investment of her husband by agreeing, to a greater or lesser extent, to take care of the family and to, at least temporarily, put her own career on the back burner. Ultimately, she holds a significant share of resources that are necessary for the success of her partner. But power within the couple depends on the comparative resources of both spouses (Blood and Wolfe, 1960) and it is the family member who has the most resources to offer who controls the balance of power (Heath and Ciscel, 1988). Thus, is it not the case that the female copreneur, who brings to the system both her domestic and professional resources is, in fact, the one that actually controls the balance of power (especially as she remains—even if she sets her own career aside—a working woman)? However, academic research confirms that working women have more power than those who do not work (De Singly, 1987; Shukla, 1987¹²).

More broadly, Kelley and Thibaut (1959: 114) argue that in a dyad, if one person holds the power, the other necessarily holds the counter-power. However, both are dependent, as if *A* has a significant power over *B*, they are necessarily dependent on *B* to allow them to exercise that power. If *B* decides not to allow *A* to exert their power (for example, if the copreneur wife decides to divorce, or decides to employ someone to take care of domestic tasks so that she can play a key role in the company), *A* will incur high costs in terms of reorganization, negotiation, loss of authority, etc. The power of the female copreneur, although not obvious, is no less a decisive counter-power as she has the ability to accept or reject the power of her husband.

Kelley and Thibaut (1959: 101) claim that the power of *A* over *B* increases in proportion to the ability of *A* to affect the quality of the benefits obtained by *B*. Consequently, is it not the case that the copreneur wife could be, in her capacity the holder and modulator of the effectiveness of the power of her husband, the partner who has the most power to affect the quality of the benefits obtained by their spouse?

P4. Sharing copreneurial power between formal and informal forms improves the clarity of the entrepreneurial structure.

Every company must base itself on legitimate domination (Weber, 1922). Organizations, seen as a social system, cannot survive being run by two people as it is inconsistent with developing a coherent vision and taking clear action.

The presence of two co-directors sends a negative signal to business partners (Reid and Karambayya, 2009). Rosenblatt *et al.* (1985) come to the same conclusion: all respondents in their study considered that there could be only one official boss. The reverse creates confusion and increases the risk of not being taken seriously. Copreneurs themselves recognize that it is best to only have one person to head the company, even if, at the same time, important decisions are taken jointly (Moitoza, 1997).

Researchers and copreneurial actors share the same opinion with respect to dual, egalitarian leadership: it makes it difficult to clearly identify the company's figurehead and is therefore detrimental.

In this context, the sharing of power between an official and unofficial executive may be a solution that overcomes this problem. One of the two partners can be identified as the “boss”, while the other also leads, but from behind the scenes. Each has a clearly defined role, which helps to improve the performance of the copreneurial company (Tompson and Tompson, 2000).

P5. Sharing copreneurial power between formal and informal forms reduces opposition costs between partners.

In the copreneurial business, the relationship between the partners should be collaborative rather than competitive.

Copreneurs must be particularly vigilant not to be driven by the possession of power that may lead them to behave egocentrically or selfishly. Some definitions of power make direct reference to the search for personal gains over the general interest. For example, Crozier and Friedberg (1977) paraphrase the definition developed by Dahl (1968), and argue that the power of *A* over *B* corresponds to the ability of *A* to obtain, in negotiations with *B*, favourable terms of trade. In other words, power is based on the capacity to structure the negotiated exchange of behaviour in an individual's favour, and on a “selfish strategy of the actor” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1995).

Competition is, however, essential to business success. Consequently, it may exist, but only between the couple system and the outside world, rather than within the couple system itself (Marshack, 1998). Copreneurs understand and implement a policy of non-competition between themselves, often through a differentiated allocation of power. It is important that the question of who is the boss of the other does not arise (Cisneros and Deschamps, 2013). Each is a leader in their own domain. The issue therefore does not lie in the equal division of power, but in the balanced sharing of different powers.

Hidden power may indicate a more-or-less conscious strategy that aims to avoid challenge: “To avoid being attacked, the *de facto* authority claims [...] to have no power” (Lemaire, 1979).

P6. Sharing copreneurial power between formal and informal forms reduces the costs of social non-compliance.

“If the social world treated individuals of the two sexes the same, social science would have nothing to say about them” (Lahire, 2001). In practice, the most discussed topic in studies of the copreneurship is that of the traditional gender orientation of roles (Marshack, 1994).

The traditional model corresponds to a social phenomenon that defines certain roles, and therefore certain tasks as “masculine” and others as “feminine” (Labardin and Robic, 2008). Two major bodies of theory attempt to explain how this stereotyped social model has emerged.

First, essentialist theory, initially proposed by Popper (1945) and subsequently frequently criticized, posits that men and women are essentially different and this is why they have distinct behaviours, and play separate roles in society. From this perspective, traditional gendered patterns of role distributions are because of the intrinsic nature of men and women.

On the other hand, social influence theorists argue that the secular reproduction of this traditional model is not because of nature but culture. Individual behaviour is subconsciously influenced by the expectations of the people who surround them (Vorauer and Miller, 1997; Snyder and Stukas, 1999). The theory of social roles (Eagly, 1987) shows that each person develops expectations based on culturally determined beliefs about the behaviours and attitudes that are considered to be appropriate. This is what Deutsch and Gerard (1955) call the “normative influence” (that is, the influence of social norms), and what Bourdieu (1990) calls the “habitus” (that is, the provisions, attitudes, orientations, habits, values and beliefs learned through socialization). Individual behaviour is influenced by the perception of the social group they belong to (Cantor and Mischel, 1977). Social identity motivates, directs and limits behaviour (Webster, 1975).

The individual is drawn to conform to these social expectations, whether real or imaginary, and adopt consistent behaviours and/ or beliefs (Bédard *et al.*, 2006). This is the phenomenon known as “behavioural confirmation” (Snyder and Klein, 2005). In the opposite case, it is called “behavioural disconfirmation”. Behavioural confirmation explains why some shared social stereotypes persist. In general, individuals behave in a way that confirms these stereotypes, which consequently makes them

legitimate. Behavioural confirmation legitimates social influence and vice versa. But behavioural confirmation also avoids the cost of ostracism (the opinion of others, the need for justifications, the risk of being expelled from the group and so on) (Asch, 1955). Individuals adapt their behaviour to the norm if they believe that the cost of “deviance” will be too difficult to bear. They internalize social values related to the behaviour of men and women, and then reproduce a behaviour that is consistent with these values, which allows them to enjoy the benefits of a certain normativity.

Copreneurs no exception to the rule. Christiansen and Rosenthal (1982) show that behavioural confirmation is seen most clearly in dyads composed of a man and a woman. Moreover, many authors note that family businesses are the archetype of gender stereotypes (Lyman, 1988; Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990; Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990; Salganicoff, 1990) and that their organization reflects the traditional pattern that is present in society in general (Jaffe, 1990; Salganicoff, 1990).

Copreneurs therefore also adhere to a very traditional understanding of roles, with women conforming to the expectations of the female model and men to that of the male model (Marshack, 1998: 97; Sharma, 2004). Ponthieu and Caudill (1993) argue that elements of identity attributed to men and women are so rooted in the social culture that copreneurs are impregnated, and it becomes difficult for them to override this dominant model. With respect to the power relations between partners, Lemaire (1979) explains that the spouse who exercises hidden power, that is, the woman, “humours her partner” and avoids “stirring up archaic worries of castration”. In these cases, when the woman is seen as the leader of the couple and the company, the man can feel that his traditional social responsibilities are diminished. “In terms of practices and implicit ideology that is more-or-less shameful and unspoken depending on the environment, it is the role of breadwinner of the spouse that remains the baseline” (Hochschild and Machung, 2012). This is why some men feel that they have lost this identity when their wife is seen as the official head of the company.

But social prescriptions mean that the woman herself comes to consider this model as the norm. It is often the case that women do not hold the position they want and/or deserve simply because they do not dare to ask (Babcock *et al.*, 2003; Bowles *et al.*, n.d.). It is inculcated in them from childhood: rather than further their own interests they should instead focus on the needs of others. “Women who assertively pursue their own ambitions and promote their own interests may be labelled as bitchy or pushy” (Babcock *et al.*, 2003).

Social conventions therefore, insidiously, encourage women to stay in the background, while men find part of their masculine identity in putting themselves forward to a greater or lesser extent.

By putting themselves in a position that is consistent with this model, partners avoid any cognitive dissonance resulting from a mismatch between their behaviour and the expectations of their socio-cultural environment.

Labardin and Robic (2008) go further, and claim that this pattern is so favourable to family businesses that they can be considered as “the guarantor of their creation and their sustainability”. More generally, Brannon *et al.* (2013) point out that the more the behaviour of members of the family business conforms to what is expected of them, the more their association is likely to be successful.

P7. Sharing copreneurial power between formal and informal forms fosters the creation of informal relational norms.

Formal and informal governance mechanisms coexist and complement each other (Calabro and Mussolino, 2013), particularly in family businesses (Huse, 1993), because of dual economic and non-economic objectives (Mustakallio, 2002). Informal

mechanisms are very often seen as a substitute for formal mechanisms (Poppo and Zenger, 2002), especially with respect to important strategic decisions (Calabro and Mussolino, 2013), and as decisive determinants of the behaviour of family actors (Huse, 1993). As highlighted above, informal power may ultimately prove to have a greater impact in decision-making than formal power.

Consequently, the existence of informal power gives the company a competitive advantage. It improves performance, as it is based on supra-contractual norms that help to harmonize relations (Macneil, 1980, 2000, 2003), and solve complex problems by facilitating communication and discussion between decision-makers (Calabro and Mussolino, 2013). Informal relational norms also help to improve and facilitate the decision-making process (Gallo and Pont, 1996) especially as women, who tend to be the informal custodians of power, are likely to favour harmony in order to preserve family unity and company continuity. They often play a key role in preserving the family’s heritage, by including family members in the business, and promoting values such as responsibility and community, all imbued with a spirit of cooperation and unconditional support (Poza and Messer, 2001). Although often standing in the wings, women play a decisive role in the continuity and growth of the family business (Jimenez, 2009).

P8. Sharing copreneurial power between formal and informal forms fosters the satisfaction of both spouses.

The sharing of formal/informal power facilitates interactions between decision-making spouses, as the spouse who holds official power includes their partner in the decision-making process. The more a spouse is included in the decision-making process, the more they are inclined to invest in the company (Van Auken and Werbel, 2006). Formal and informal cooperation in decision-making between the two partners contributes to shared satisfaction. Rosen and Granbois (1983) note that cooperative decision-making within the couple gives both spouses an increased locus of control (Rotter, 1954), that is, a greater sense of control over events that affect them. A greater locus of control has been shown to increase individual and marital satisfaction measured by the perceived quality of the relationship (Myers and Booth, 1999).

Moreover, the auxiliary spouse (De Bruin and Lewis, 2004) is not necessarily conceived as “subject” or “inferior” to their partner. The position is often welcomed. In his study of copreneur lawyers, Epstein (1971) notes that many women do not appreciate the competitive court environment and prefer to stay behind the scenes. For many of them, their ambitions extend beyond their career, to include being a mother and wife.

This division of powers is therefore often the result of a psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989, 2001) put in place and accepted by both copreneurs. When the contract is explicit and understood by both parties, it underpins “a system that supports optimal production under passive leadership” (Argyris, 1960). In these circumstances, it is not a question of the domination of one over the other (usually the man over the woman). In practice, there can be no domination when the dominant position is the result of an agreement that both parties have freely agreed to (Fourçans, 2006).¹³

The distribution of formal/ informal power can thus offer copreneurs a certain degree of balance. According to Lemaire (1979), the power relations within the couple are unconscious. The more passive member tends to delegate authority to their partner. This delegation, although it may appear asymmetrical, can lead to mutual satisfaction and stability within the couple. Richter (1974) notes that within a couple there is necessarily, seen from outside, a “weak” half and a “strong” half. He added that this Manichaeism is moderated by a psychological analysis: the strong one is actually someone who finds it difficult to admit their

weaknesses and chooses someone who is weaker to improve their image of themselves. The feeling of self-worth emerges through the weaker partner. As for the weaker party, their partner represents their ideal self. If this is not the case, satisfaction is found in narcissistic identification. This is what Folsom (1943) calls the “rubbing off” effect, that is, a person who benefits from the aura and prestige of someone they are associated with. In the end, each partner benefits from the marital power relationship, and the apparent power imbalance is actually a balance that improves the performance of the copreneurial company.

P9. Sharing copreneurial power between formal power and informal forms fosters a sense of equality between partners.

Although the formal power held by the man means that he tends to take on the official role as the principal decision-maker, research reveals that the wife is a partner who considers herself to be, and who is considered to be an equal¹⁴ (Ponthieu and Caudill, 1993; Lucaccini and Muscat, 2001; Dyer *et al.*, 2012). Why? The answer seems to lie in the pursuit of an equitable distribution of power; even if the woman appears to take a supporting role, this does not mean that she is not considered as a key actress in the decision-making process (Hirigoyen and Villéger, 2015b). This is what Thibaut and Walker (1975) identify as the feeling of “procedural justice”: individuals evaluate the fairness of procedural components, and the results of this assessment form the basis for the perceived level of fairness (Leventhal, 1976).

This feeling has a positive impact on the performance of the family business as it enhances satisfaction, trust and the commitment of family members (Kim and Mauborgne, 1997; Van der Heyden *et al.*, 2005; Parent and Perrier, 2007; Carlock and Ward, 2010; Schulze and Gedajlovic, 2010). It also reinforces the feeling of fairness in decision-making processes by negating potential informal asymmetries. A lack of “informative justice”¹⁵ (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001) refers to the situation where the partner of the official power holder has important information that they fail, knowingly or not, to transmit to the other. The partner of the informal power holder feels aggrieved as a result, which in turns leads to a loss of confidence and an increase in mistrust that generates agency costs (Jensen and Meckling, 1976). Individuals who deem the process to be unfair will try to undo decisions, counterattack and/or commit acts of sabotage, regardless of whether the decision was a good one or not (Kim and Mauborgne, 1997).

In general, an asymmetry in power levels has a negative impact on teams, and “power sharing” must be seen as a sign of a “power imbalance”. In the copreneurship, the distribution of power influences company performance¹⁶; the greater the degree of equality, the more successful the company. Copreneurial companies with lowest productivity correspond to those in which the man holds most of the power. When interactions between couples are collaborative and equitable, productivity increases (Hedberg and Danes, 2012). To be efficient, the copreneurship must be synonymous with the equitable allocation of roles and powers (Millman and Martin, 2007). “Copreneurs should strive for equal leadership between them [...] Spouses who share the leadership of their business equally are more likely to experience their involvement in the copreneurship as being satisfying and beneficial to their family, marriage and personal development than those copreneurs who are led by the husband only” (Foley and Powell, 1997). Equity in decision-making and negotiating the company’s challenges preserves both the business and the marital relationship (Charles, 2006).

The conceptual model and generalization

The propositions put forward and discussed above led to the development of the model as shown in Figure 1.

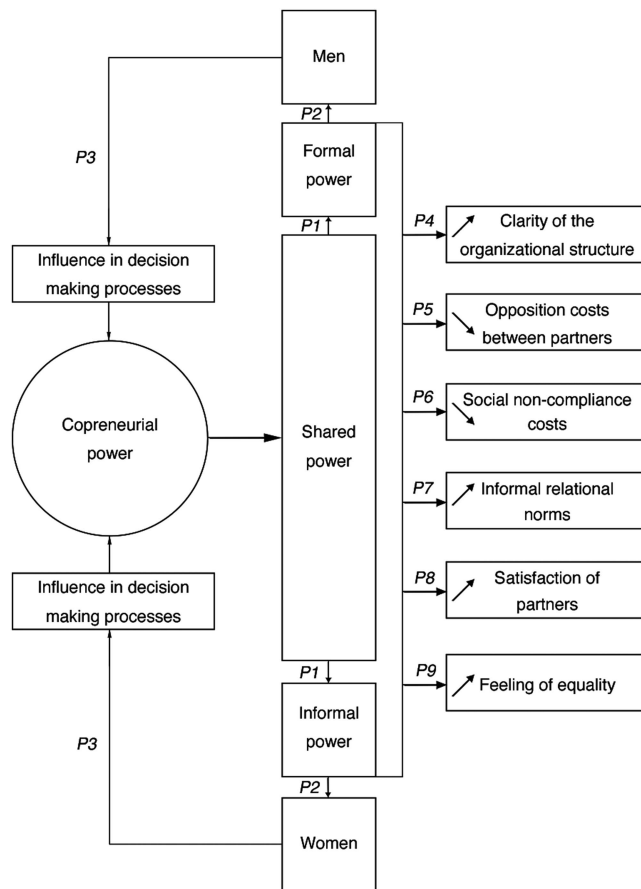


Figure 1 | Conceptual model of copreneurial power.

This model was created for the specific example of the copreneurship. However, it could lead to a broader theoretical study of the role of women in other organizational contexts. The arguments presented above at the level of the company can be applied to other organizational units, for example, the entrepreneurial team or family.

Theorists of the company who have analyzed the functioning of entrepreneurial teams (Alchian and Demsetz, 1972; Holmstrom, 1982; Rajan and Zingales, 1998, 2001) justify the existence of a hierarchy by the need to train team members and avoid the “lone rider” phenomenon. The person who holds hierarchical authority has a formal power that allows him/her to fire team members who are judged to be ineffective.

For Blair and Stout (1999), the efficient operation of the company is the result of a “mediation hierarchy” created by enhanced vertical and horizontal cooperation. In this case, the company’s board assumes the role of an independent third party tasked with supporting this mediation and arbitrating between financial and human capital (Hirigoyen, 2000). (Fig. 2)

But all these arguments regarding the more-or-less participatory formal power held by the hierarchy overlook the nature of the relationship between the members of this hierarchy. In the light of this research, and by reintroducing “gender” as a variable, it becomes possible to envisage changes in the nature of the hierarchical relationship. This invites the study of the impact of the integration of this variable into theoretical models of the entrepreneurial team. Two examples come to mind; either the person who is higher up in the hierarchy and who has formal power, is a man. In this case, women occupy a subordinate position and their informal power is then integrated into theoretical models of the team. In the other case, the person

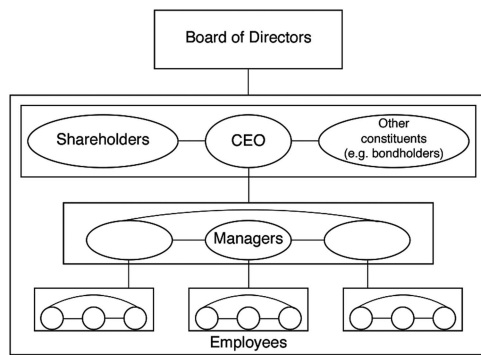


Figure 2 | Vertical and horizontal cooperation in the mediation hierarchy (Source: Blair and Stout, 1999). This image is not covered by the CC-BY license.

who is at the top of the hierarchy is a woman. She holds formal power and the men she manages are directly subject to her authority. The question of their respect and acceptance of this power should then be investigated, and the results might highlight “lone ranger” behaviour on the part of the latter. An understanding in terms of gains and losses for the entrepreneurial team could then be evaluated and lead to the emergence of significant differences between the two configurations.

This discussion of the copreneurship can also be used to support the study of power relations in the “family” organizational unit. Relationships between parents and children of the opposite sex, or between male and female siblings can, for example, be examined. Within one of the first social structures experienced by the child, relationship with their siblings, is there already an allocation of power that is organized around formal and informal axes? Could power interactions between parents and children of the opposite sex also be influenced by underlying gendered patterns? In collaboration with researchers in psychology or sociology, the model proposed here could be replicated and modified to shed light on these issues. Gendron (2006), for example, shows that parents tend to encourage their male children to defend their interests and affirm their personality to a greater extent than they do their daughters. From an early age, boys appear to be more comfortable with taking physical (“daredevil” behaviour) and social (confrontation and competition) risks than girls. Conversely, girls are encouraged to be docile, obedient and any shyness is more acceptable to their parents.

This study may even provide the basis for a general examination of the power relations between men and women in contemporary society as, although for about two centuries society has been very gradually moving away from the traditional pattern, it is no less marked by a gender division of activities (Marquet, 2008). According to a United Nations report published in 2012,¹⁷ women perform 66% of the work in the world (including unpaid work) produce 50% of the food, but only earn 10% of the income and only own 1% of property.

Conclusion

This article is a theoretical demonstration of the dynamics of power relations between men and women in the copreneurial business. It considers the division between formal and informal power, the latter being held mainly by women, but being none the less influential. It highlights the positive impact of a division of formal and informal power: this distribution reduces opposition costs between partners and social non-compliance costs, improves the clarity of the entrepreneurial structure, the creation

of informal relational norms and the feeling of equality between partners.

At the operational level, this study enables copreneurs to better understand the power relations that they experiment with on a daily basis. It could help them to identify the antecedents and the challenges of a gendered distribution of informal and formal power. Further research could highlight the impact of this distribution on company performance. Writing on this topic, De Bruin and Lewis (2001, 2004) argue that the association of a “primary” career (the more visible partner who exercises formal governance) with an “auxiliary” career¹⁸ (the “auxiliary” partner who exercises informal governance in the background) is an indispensable prerequisite for the resilience and success of the copreneurial company.¹⁹ An empirical study could also be carried out.

Moreover, in response to the call by Campbell (2002) for the promotion of “matrilineal” alternatives in the investigation of entrepreneurship, and from Smith (2009, 2014) that we should investigate relationships in the family business through the prism of the matriarchy,²⁰ researchers could look at the preponderant influence of some female copreneurs in the workplace and the family. These women, like true matriarchs (Hearn, 1996; Jaffe and Lane, 2004; Martin, 2004; Bertrand and Schoar, 2006), define a type of “bastion” conjugal dynamics—to use the terminology of Coenen-Huthner (2001), that is, they dominate decision-making and negotiations within the couple. In this case, power relations are reversed; they hold the official power, often leaving their spouses with little informal power.

Finally, social change should be monitored and viewed as a potential source of future work. In 2001, Koss-Feder announced the emergence of a new organization of powers, in an article with the evocative title *Wife is boss in new business model for couples*. For example, Rudy Lewis, President of the National Association of Home-Based Businesses in the United States estimated that “the number of husbands reporting to their wives has grown by as much as 50 per cent over the last 5 years” (cited in Koss-Feder, 2001: 6).

But whatever the model that eventually dominates, the words of Aragon (1963) remain pertinent: “The future of man is woman. She is the color of his soul. She is his word and his sound. And without Her, he is simply blasphemy”.

Notes

- 1 Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary and Thesaurus (2016), Cambridge University Press.
- 2 McKinsey Global Institute Report (September 2015), *The power of parity: how advancing women’s equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth*, by Jonathan Woetzel, Anu Madgavkar, Kweilin Ellingrud, Eric Labaye, Sandrine Devillard, Eric Kutcher, James Manyika, Richard Dobbs, and Mekala Krishnan.
- 3 This study evaluated 21,980 companies in 91 countries. Peterson Institute for International Economics (February 2016), *Is Gender Diversity Profitable? Evidence from a Global Survey*, by Marcus Noland, Tyler Moran, and Barbara Kotschwar. Working Paper 16.
- 4 The median proportion of female executives was found to be 7.1% for successful companies, compared to 3.1% for other companies. The chances of success of a company is positively correlated with the number of women appointed to key positions. If the number of women directors increases by 10%, the chances of success (compared to other companies) increases by 6%. *Women at the Wheel*. Dow Jones Venture Source, September 2012.
- 5 FSBS (2008): “Unlimited partnership: Couples in business.” http://money.cnn.com/2008/01/08/smbusiness/entrepreneurial_couples.fsb/ Fortune Small Business Staff
- 6 In the 1980s, the figures were lower but already significant. Thompson (1990) estimated that about 1.5 million couples were using this form of governance in the United States.
- 7 In France, married women had no legal status until 1938, and it was not until 1966 that women were able to work without the consent of their husbands. The end of joint parental authority dominated by the father was only achieved in 1970.
- 8 *Banish her to obscurity* (Epstein, 1971).

- 9 Mintzberg (1983) criticizes this definition. He argues that to define power solely in terms of the ability to change behaviour brings the notion closer to that of manipulation rather than the production of results.
- 10 According to Hedberg and Danes (2012), this distinction may be rooted theoretically in the *Family FIRO Model (Family Fundamental Interpersonal Relationship Orientation Model)*, itself inspired by organizational development theories (Schutz, 1958). This model was applied to families (Doherty and Colangelo, 1984; Szinovacz, 1987) and then family businesses (Danes *et al.*, 2002).
- 11 Research carried out within the context of the Labour Market Dynamics Research Programme, an interdisciplinary programme on the dynamics of economic participation between households and the labour market, created by the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science and Technology.
- 12 According to De Singly (1987, p. 99), women who earn a salary have the autonomy to “settle the accounts” and initiate any separation. The dependent housewife is “doomed to happiness, or at least to pretend it is the case.”
- 13 In this regard, in their investigation of the answer to the question “Who is the boss?” Ponthieu and Caudill (1993) sought to highlight four key themes: equality, domination, mutual trust and interchangeability. However, their examination of the literature revealed that domination rarely appeared. They presumed that this was because of the term’s very negative connotation, which implies the intentional control of one by another. They therefore considered using the word “predominant” which has a less divisive, more positive connotation. Finally, the expression that they deemed most appropriate was “independence in the decision-making process”.
- 14 “While the husband still tends to be the boss, the wife is an equal partner” (Ponthieu and Caudill, 1993).
- 15 Informative justice refers, according to Colquitt *et al.* (2001) to the transfer of information or explanations between the parties involved.
- 16 The division of power also affects the smooth operation of the family. As Hirigoyen (2000) notes, family unity presupposes a certain balance between the powers of family members.
- 17 United Nations—World Bank (2012), *Removing Barriers to Economic Inclusion, Women Business and the Law*, IFC.
- 18 The authors state that the “auxiliary” career is not inferior or subordinate to the “primary” career, but that the relationship is more one of providing help and support.
- 19 And in most cases, for the efficient functioning of the family (De Bruin and Lewis (2001, 2004)).
- 20 Smith (2009, 2014) considers matriarchy indices (as opposed to the patriarchy that Davies, 2010 defines as an organized social system that places the man at the head of the family and the main authority figure) could be addressed if scientists “did not limit themselves to the dominant narrative logic of heroic stories about men”.
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Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed in this study.

Additional information

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