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Article abstract

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Keywords: couples, parents, intellectual disability, personal project

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The birth of even a typically developing child comes with challenges and requires adaptation from the parents and the family (Saxbe et al., 2018). When the child has an intellectual disability, the parental burden is even greater (Springer et al., 2018). Indeed, among parents of a child with an intellectual disability, parenting stress is a widespread issue (Neece & Chan, 2017). These parents face multiple chronic stressors, such as special caregiving needs, medical follow-ups, and financial strain, as well as feelings of isolation and lack of social support (see Neece & Chan, 2017, for more detail). Their exposure to chronic stress may lead these parents to overuse their personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which may explain why these parents are at a higher risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Huang et al., 2014; Rydzewska et al., 2021).

Krueger and colleagues (2021) pointed out that most studies on parental stress in this population have adopted an individual perspective; they advocate for the use of a systemic approach to investigate interpersonal effects in the family system. As the couple is at the core of the family system (Langley et al., 2021), it is a unit that should be further studied. High marital satisfaction in these parents has indeed been shown to be protective against depression (e.g., Gerstein et al., 2009; Kersh et al., 2006) and to contribute to well-being (Proulx et al., 2007) by fulfilling the need for relatedness, defined as the need to feel connected to others, to love and to be loved (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is also positively linked to parenting competence (Kersh et al., 2006), hope, adaptive coping strategies, and life satisfaction (Krueger et al., 2021).

One factor that contributes to marital satisfaction is the achievement of marital goals by both partners (Czyżkowska & Cieciuch, 2020). It has even been argued that whether or not marital goals are achieved is the most important factor explaining marital satisfaction (Li & Fung, 2011).

Until now, research has focused on the importance of marital satisfaction for parents of a child having an intellectual disability, but the results on the effect of parenthood on marital satisfaction have been inconsistent. Some studies have shown that the marital satisfaction of these parents is lower than in the general population (Risdal & Singer, 2004; Santamaria et al., 2012). Such differences are often explained by stress vulnerability or conjugal difficulties prior to the birth of the disabled child (Glidden et al., 2021). According to other studies that did not find significant differences (Norlin & Broberg, 2013; Wieland & Baker, 2010), raising a child with an intellectual disability may bring parents closer together and be a source of meaning for them as a couple (Pedersen et al., 2015). In conclusion, marital satisfaction and relationship adjustment processes in these parents are not straightforward. They are multifactorial, change across family cycle stages, and depend on characteristics of the parents and of the child as well as on contextual factors (Glidden et al., 2021). Furthermore, although less research has been conducted on fathers, their marital satisfaction trajectories appear to differ from those of mothers, with the mothers' decreasing linearly over time, while the fathers' declines during early childhood before rising through middle childhood (Pedersen et al., 2015). In this regard, marital projects provide valuable

insights into the adaptation processes of these parents, as they take into account the context and a variety of factors.

However, to our knowledge, no study has explored the marital relationship projects (MRPs) of these parents, by which they may fulfil their need for relatedness. Conjugal relationships are particularly important to the adaptation of these parents and their personal projects can provide valuable information on the personal and conjugal effects of having a child with an intellectual disability. The very few studies taking a goal-related perspective have focused on parents' child-related goals (e.g., van der Veek et al., 2009; Young et al., 2018). The present study aims to further explore the MRPs of parents of a child with an intellectual disability.

Conceptual Background

This section begins with a definition of goals and personal projects, then introduces two theoretical frameworks relevant to MRPs that serve as a foundation for the present research. Studies relevant to the contribution of projects to well-being and marital satisfaction are then discussed. Lastly, the purpose of this study is outlined.

Definition of Goals and Personal Projects

The concepts of goals and personal projects are similar and often used interchangeably in the scientific literature (Helgeson, 2019; Hietalahti et al., 2016). They can both be viewed as desired states that individuals are attempting to reach (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Little (1983) and Little and Coulombe (2015) defined personal projects as sequences of interdependent ongoing or future-oriented actions in an everyday context; they can be represented on a continuum from daily tasks (e.g., preparing meals) to life commitments (e.g., child education). When projects structure the participant's project system and contribute substantially to life meaning and personal identity, they are considered central projects (Little, 1983; McGregor & Little, 1998).

Socioecological Model of Well-Being

The core postulate of Little's socioecological model (2000) is that engagement in central personal projects can lead to fulfilment (Little, 1999). The model proposes that well-being is influenced by three main factors: biogenic, sociogenic, and idiogenic. Biogenic factors are relatively stable individual characteristics that likely have a biological underpinning, such as enduring preferences. Sociogenic factors are environmental influences arising from the individual's context and culture, such as family or marital status. Idiogenic factors are represented by personal projects. Biogenic, sociogenic, and idiogenic factors jointly influence well-being. The distinctive feature of this model is the importance given to personal projects in relation to well-being.

As maintaining strong and stable interpersonal relationships is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), an individual's central personal projects are likely to include some that are love-related. Thus, Little's socioecological model was adapted to study love-

related projects. It distinguishes three types: romancing projects (e.g., being in love with someone), connecting projects (e.g., improving communication between partners), and caring projects (e.g., helping one's partner through difficulties; Little & Frost, 2013). This model suggests that the way people manage their life roles depends on the nature of their projects, and on the manner they interact with one another (independent, conflicting and/or facilitating) and with their close circle, including the partner (Little, 2000). Consequently, the model is well-suited for studying the MRPs of parents of child with an intellectual disability.

Dynamic Goal Theory of Marital Satisfaction

The dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction offers a way of grouping goals related to conjugal life into three categories: personal growth, instrumental, and companionship (Li & Fung, 2011). The first category of marital goals mentioned by Li and Fung (2011) includes those for which support from the partner is present; the second refers to goals in which the partners cooperate in a complementary way in order to support the physiological and security needs of the family (e.g., food, housing); and the third concerns intimacy and affection between partners and corresponds to the needs for love and relatedness.

Intimate relationships are particularly important to the fulfilment of the need for relatedness (Patrick et al., 2007) and, in the context of the present study, that need is often met by closeness and intimacy between partners (Schmahl & Walper, 2012). This highlights the importance of studying companionship goals, since those are related to intimacy and affection. However, as the term "companionship" implies friendship, the expression "marital relationship project" was used instead, in order to avoid any confusion. Moreover, the term "marital" simply refers to cohabitation, and includes any couple regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Indeed, nowadays, in certain nations, cohabitation and married unions are considered mostly equivalent (Treas et al., 2014), as is the case in the Canadian province of Quebec (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004), where the present study was conducted.

In conclusion, the dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction is complementary to Little's model and helps explain how partners divide their time and resources and on how they interact, shedding light on the priority they give to marital goals and their realization. The similarity or dissimilarity between the partners' central goals can alter the couple dynamic and the quality of their relationship (Li et al., 2020).

Relevant Studies on the Contribution of Projects to Well-Being and Marital Satisfaction

The undertaking of personal projects has been extensively studied and found to be associated with well-being (Klug & Maier, 2014). Well-being can be linked to personal projects through appraisal of their different characteristics; Little et al. (2007) grouped these into the dimensions of positive or negative emotions, feasibility, motivation, meaning, and social support (Little et al., 2007). Personal projects associated with more positive emotions and less negative ones are the most likely to promote well-being (Little & Coulombe, 2015). If a central project is not achieved,

it may cause deleterious effects (Lewis, 1990). Moreover, several studies (e.g., Bauer et al., 2005; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; McGregor & Little, 1998) reveal that intrinsic and meaningful goals are correlated with higher levels of well-being and self-actualization. The contributions of intrinsic motivation and meaning to the benefits of pursuing a goal is explained by the satisfaction of at least one of the basic needs stated by self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Weinstein et al., 2012).

Support, especially from the partner, is another dimension to consider in the study of personal projects. In fact, mutual support is linked to quality and satisfaction in relationships and may lead to additional support and coherence between partners' projects (Hofmann et al., 2015; Molden et al., 2009; Overall et al., 2010). Furthermore, perceived progress and coherence between partners' projects contribute to marital satisfaction (Avivi et al., 2009). Likewise, involvement in activities that sustain projects of both partners is related to greater closeness (Gere et al., 2011).

Studies have also shown that the higher the number of joint projects, the greater the marital satisfaction and the more positive the emotional effect (Hwang, 2004; Sanderson & Cantor, 2001). Time spent together for leisure or vacations is crucial for a couple's relationship and reinforces conjugal identity (de Bloom et al., 2016; Hickman-Evans et al., 2018). It offers the opportunity to strengthen mutual attachment (de Bloom et al., 2016), cohesion (Agate et al., 2009), communication between partners, and conflict management skills (Hickman-Evans et al., 2018). Spending time in joint activities affirms the partners' relationship commitment and mutual interest (Stanley et al., 2010). Spontaneous activities that require little planning (e.g., sharing a meal, training together) provide opportunities for partners to cultivate their relationship (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001).

Several studies have shown that quality time, satisfaction, and a commitment to shared leisure activities have a positive effect on the couple relationship and family functioning that goes beyond that of merely spending time together (Johnson & Anderson, 2013; Shahvali et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2014), and can even prevent divorce (Hill, 1988). However, the presence of children limits the time available for the couple to spend together, and for personal leisure activities (Browning et al., 2020).

Intimacy goals are generally very meaningful to the individuals who commit to them (Frost, 2011) and are linked to relationship satisfaction (Zimmer-Gembeck & Petherick, 2006). However, contrary to expectations, measures of similarity or dissimilarity of partners' projects show no relation to conjugal satisfaction (Gray & Coons, 2017). Reliance on purely quantitative measures (e.g., correlation for each couple, and difference scores between members on the target variable) may explain these surprising results (Gray & Coons, 2017), as such measures reflect neither the quality of the relationship nor the way goals are shared and pursued in a relationship context.

To conclude, when analyzing MRPs, both partners should be considered (Li et al., 2020), along with the similarity of partners' projects and their commitment towards them (Czyżkowska &

Cieciuch, 2020). In fact, project similarity may be less important for relationship quality than is the way projects are pursued (Gray & Coons, 2017). Thus, qualitative research is needed to understand conjugal dynamics, using partners' personal appraisals of these projects, and their degree of similarity.

Purpose of the Present Study

This study aims to explore the content of the MRPs of couples who are parents of a child with an intellectual disability. Additionally, it seeks to characterize the appraisals of each partner according to their life context, as well as the conjugal dynamics pertaining to the achievement of these projects. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of the priorities of parents, their separate appraisals of the projects' realization, and whether they share the same perceptions and projects. Gaining knowledge about these parents' marital projects and how they are appraised will make it possible to offer support and resources that will help them pursue their MRPs.

Method

Research Design Overview

This qualitative study is based on an interpretive description research design, which allows a rich and comprehensive analysis and offers the potential to reveal the details of a complex phenomenon in its natural context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Such a design enables a detailed description of the MRPs of parents of a child with an intellectual disability, which may inform professionals about their needs regarding support and resources. According to Thorne and colleagues (2004), this inductive approach takes account of human subjectivity by paying attention to both the participants' and the researchers' viewpoints. The interpretative nature of the description refers to the process of searching for meanings, relationships, or patterns between the components.

Participant Recruitment

Prior to the recruitment of participants, an ethical approval was issued by the ethical committee of the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux de la Mauricie-et-du-Centre-du-Québec (CIUSSS-MCQ: CÉRC-0253). Partnerships with Integrated Health and Social Services Centres (CISSS) and Integrated University Health and Social Services Centres (CIUSSS) led to data collection across three regions that were home to populations between 90,000 and 278,000 in the province of Quebec. All families of these regions whose school-age child with an intellectual disability used services from a rehabilitation centre received a letter about the ongoing study, informing them that they would likely be contacted by a professional of their centre to solicit their participation. During a phone call, the professional presented the study objectives and the measures that would be taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. To meet inclusion criteria, children had to be from 6 to 18 years and have a diagnosis of intellectual disability or global developmental delay, but no autism spectrum disorder diagnosis. Both parents had to agree to participate and have custody of the child with an intellectual disability. After consent was obtained, their contact details

were provided to the principal investigator. The response rate was 44.2% and the reasons given for not participating were 68.3% lack of time, 28.6% no interest, and 3.2% both.

Subsequently, two research assistants (a woman and a man) made an appointment to meet with the parent of the same sex separately in their home. Interviewing the parents separately allowed them to talk with more transparency, in part because they did not have to restrain themselves from saying things that could negatively affect their relationship (Beitin, 2008). Furthermore, it prevented one member of the couple from being able to dominate the conversation, which could give a portrait biased towards the perspective of the most assertive partner (Hertz, 1995). On another note, the parents were interviewed by someone of the same sex because similarities based on gender may contribute to the establishment of a better alliance (Broom et al., 2009). Following a signed consent, parents completed the personal projects analysis (PPA) grid (Little, 1983) in a semi-structured, 60-minute interview, which was conducted in French. Parents received $60 CAD per family. All interviewers were trained in counselling, and a social worker from the CIUSSS was available for consultation in case of emergency.

Study Participants

The sample included 34 opposite-sex couples with a child having an intellectual disability (25 biological families and nine stepfamilies). The couples had been together from 1 to 30 years (M = 16.28; SD = 7.73). The mean age of mothers was 43.09 (SD = 6.82), and of fathers was 45.76 (SD = 6.34). On average, the couples had 2.68 full-time children at home (SD = 1.00). Of the children with an intellectual disability, 16 were girls and 18 were boys; 16 were from 6 to 11 years old and 18 were from 12 to 18 years old.

Half of the parents held a college or university diploma. Almost three quarters worked full time (91.2% of fathers vs. 55.9% of mothers), while about 15% worked part-time (5.9% of fathers vs. 23.5% of mothers). Around 40% reported a family income of $100,000 or more, about 50% from $30,000 to $99,999, and about 8.0% less than $30,000. Most declared that they had sufficient income to meet family needs (69.1%) or reported being at ease financially (22.1%). However, 8.8% considered themselves poor.

Instruments

In addition to a sociodemographic questionnaire, the PPA grid (Little, 1983) was used to gather the projects of parents of a child with an intellectual disability. The grid was administered in the form of a semi-structured interview, as recommended for intensive research designs (Little & Gee, 2007). The grid is a flexible, reliable, and valid instrument to study activities directed towards personal goals (Little & Coulombe, 2015). For instance, Little and Gee (2007) found that it provides a high level of inter-rater agreement in the categorization of projects in their life domains. The grid has been used in diverse contexts of chronic health issues (e.g., Crombez et al., 2016; Helgeson, 2019) and provides the most in-depth assessment of personal projects among the available tools (Bedford-Petersen et al., 2019). Lastly, personal project assessment is especially

useful for scrutinizing personal and interpersonal processes in the context of dyadic coping with stress (Martos et al., 2019).

After having received a definition of what a personal project is, parents were first asked to list their own projects. They then selected the five most important ones out of their initial list and rated them on 18 characteristics using a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*). They were then asked to explain their ratings (e.g., "How difficult do you find it to carry out each project? Use 10 for a project that you find extremely difficult to carry out and 0 for one that you do not find difficult at all."). The 18 characteristics pertain to:

- personal motivations towards the project: *external* (someone or a situation requires it), *introjected* (ashamed, guilty, or anxious feelings if not realized), *identified* (must be done because it is an important goal), and *intrinsic* (for the joy and the pleasure that it procures)

- the meaning the project has for them: commitment and congruency

- the manageability of the project: level of difficulty, compatibility with other projects, feeling of control, progress, adequacy of time invested, feeling of competence, and likelihood of success

- the social aspect of the project: perceptions of their projects by those in their social circle, support received, compatibility with projects of their social circle

- the emotions associated with the project, both positive (pleasure, pride, enthusiasm, and hope), and negative (stress, anxiety, sadness, frustration, and guilt).

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was considered the most appropriate method for analyzing the data. Not only is it a widely used qualitative analytic method in psychology, it is a particularly flexible approach that allows summarizing large datasets in a comprehensive manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was performed in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, using the structured tabular thematic analysis (ST-TA) method (Robinson, 2021) to identify, analyze, and highlight patterns in the data. The following six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed: (1) become familiar with the content of the interviews, (2) generate initial codes, (3) search codes for possible themes, (4) review themes, (5) name themes and define them operationally, and (6) produce a report. Once the interviews were transcribed, a repeated reading by two independent coders allowed them to familiarize themselves with the content. The parts of the interviews related to MRPs were coded initially based on a theory-driven approach, Little's (1983) PPA grid. All codes were summarized in a table, then reviewed and refined, differentiated, and combined into themes by the same two coders. Names were then assigned to each retained theme, and these were defined operationally. Two other independent coders revised the categorization of the interviews' content based on the theme definitions. Some operational definitions were revised for greater clarity. Lastly, to illustrate key themes, some verbatim excerpts were selected on the basis of their quality and representativeness. In order to maximize the trustworthiness of the analysis, several

actions were taken, such as: clarifying the codebook to make sure that the data related to each code can be rapidly checked; drawing diagrams to visualize theme connections; paying attention to similarities and differences across cases and contextual factors; and vetting themes and subthemes with team members.

Findings

Description of Marital Relationship Projects

In choosing their five most important personal projects, 17 mothers (50%) and 17 fathers (50%) — generally those whose child with an intellectual disability was at the older end of the range — prioritized either one or two that pertained to the marital relationship. Only one mother (2.9%) and four fathers (11.8%) prioritized two. Such projects were chosen by both parents in 10 couples (29.4%), by one parent in 14 couples (41.2%), and by neither in 10 couples (29.4%).

The content of the projects can be encompassed by four categories (see Figure 1, for thematic map): trips (n = 16, 42.1%), activities (n = 10, 26.3%), couple time (n = 10, 26.3%) and weddings (n = 2, 5.3%). Couple trips were mostly mentioned by fathers (n = 13 [38.2%] vs. 3 [8.8%], $\chi^2(1)$ = 11.81, $p < .001$), whereas mothers particularly reported a desire to spend more time with their partner (n = 9 [26.5%] vs. 1 [2.9%], $\chi^2(1)$ = 9.07, $p = .003$).

Individual Appraisals

Following the thematic analysis, two central dimensions emerged from the parents' appraisals of their MRPs: commitment regarding the project, and level of confidence that the project would succeed. Commitment refers to the parent's determination to achieve the project and can be characterized as being of two types: determined and postponing. The determined showed a high level of commitment towards their project because it was congruent with their values, meaningful, and intrinsically motivated:

> My priority would be to give time to my life as a couple more…. What motivates me is my couple, my boyfriend, all the life we have lived for 20 years which is not nothing. We've been through a lot and we have overcome it with strength and love and I think it is worth continuing. That's my motivation. (F13)

Determined parents were either already invested in their project and wished to remain involved because they valued their progress, or clearly intended to increase their involvement despite difficulties.

In contrast, the postponing parents showed little commitment and were neither proactive nor motivated to make the necessary efforts. This was notably due to previous unsuccessful attempts along with some current constraints:
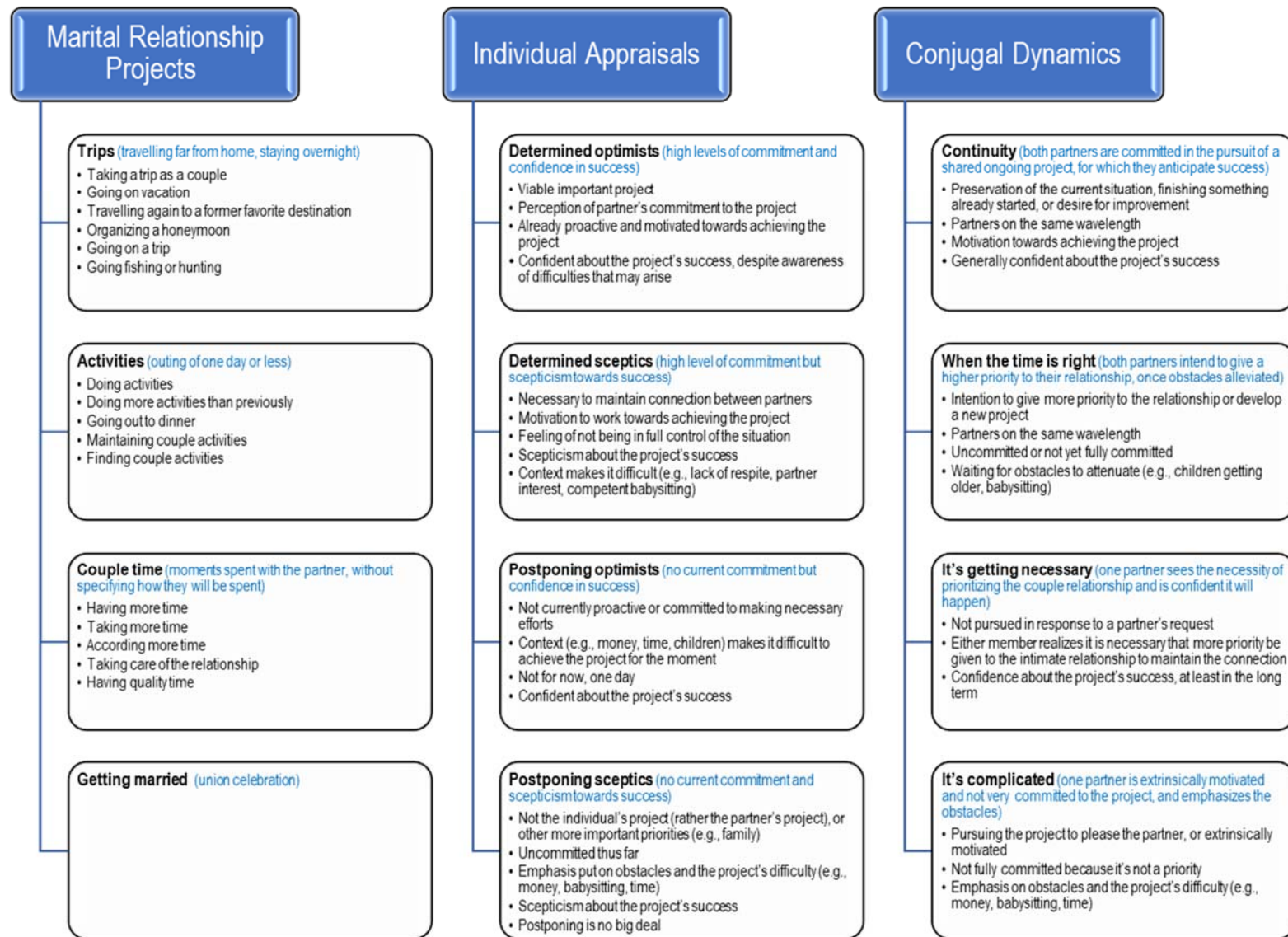
> If we leave, we have no one to look after them, I can't leave four young children all alone. It's a reality that makes it impossible … we can dream but we can't put our heads in the sand either, these are young people with special needs. (F8)

In many cases, they were waiting for their situation to resolve before taking action; in a few other cases, the parent made excuses to avoid getting involved.

The level of confidence corresponds to the likelihood of success anticipated by participants regarding their project. This dimension comprises two types of appraisals: optimistic and sceptical. Optimists were almost certain they would succeed but remained realistic regarding potential obstacles: "As for the chances of success, it's 100%. Because inevitably, we're going to find time, we're going to find a way, for sure." (M20). Sceptics were far from convinced that their project would succeed, given their previous unsuccessful attempts and important contextual constraints (e.g., lack of time, of respite services, or of partner motivation): "Chances of success are still slim for now.… Well, even if I would like to set goals, dates, I don't have anyone to look after my son, so I'm in a dead end" (F23). They seemed to acknowledge that their project might not come to fruition.

Using the two dimensions of commitment and confidence, participants were classified in four categories based on their MRP appraisals: determined optimists ($n = 19$, 50%), determined sceptics ($n = 3$, 7.9%), postponing optimists ($n = 9$, 23.7%) and postponing sceptics ($n = 7$, 18.4%). As these four profiles indicate (see Figure 1), most parents who had MRPs were striving to meet their need for relatedness either with proactive willingness (determined optimists) or with some apprehension in the face of adversity because they did not feel fully in control (determined sceptics). Other parents, however, put the satisfaction of their need for relatedness on hold because the current context did not facilitate it (postponing optimists). Some even doubted that their project would be carried out at all, but did not see that as a disadvantage, either because their partner had instigated the project or because it was simply a lesser priority for them (postponing sceptics).

Figure 1. *Thematic Map Showing Final Themes for Marital Relationship Projects, Individual Appraisals, and Conjugal Dynamics*

Marital Relationship Projects

Trips (travelling far from home, staying overnight)
- Taking a trip as a couple
- Going on vacation
- Travelling again to a former favorite destination
- Organizing a honeymoon
- Going on a trip
- Going fishing or hunting

Activities (outing of one day or less)
- Doing activities
- Doing more activities than previously
- Going out to dinner
- Maintaining couple activities
- Finding couple activities

Couple time (moments spent with the partner, without specifying how they will be spent)
- Having more time
- Taking more time
- According more time
- Taking care of the relationship
- Having quality time

Getting married (union celebration)

Individual Appraisals

Determined optimists (high levels of commitment and confidence in success)
- Viable important project
- Perception of partner's commitment to the project
- Already proactive and motivated towards achieving the project
- Confident about the project's success, despite awareness of difficulties that may arise

Determined sceptics (high level of commitment but scepticism towards success)
- Necessary to maintain connection between partners
- Motivation to work towards achieving the project
- Feeling of not being in full control of the situation
- Scepticism about the project's success
- Context makes it difficult (e.g., lack of respite, partner interest, competent babysitting)

Postponing optimists (no current commitment but confidence in success)
- Not currently proactive or committed to making necessary efforts
- Context (e.g., money, time, children) makes it difficult to achieve the project for the moment
- Not for now, one day
- Confident about the project's success

Postponing sceptics (no current commitment and scepticism towards success)
- Not the individual's project (rather the partner's project), or other more important priorities (e.g., family)
- Uncommitted thus far
- Emphasis put on obstacles and the project's difficulty (e.g., money, babysitting, time)
- Scepticism about the project's success
- Postponing is no big deal

Conjugal Dynamics

Continuity (both partners are committed in the pursuit of a shared ongoing project, for which they anticipate success)
- Preservation of the current situation, finishing something already started, or desire for improvement
- Partners on the same wavelength
- Motivation towards achieving the project
- Generally confident about the project's success

When the time is right (both partners intend to give a higher priority to their relationship, once obstacles alleviated)
- Intention to give more priority to the relationship or develop a new project
- Partners on the same wavelength
- Uncommitted or not yet fully committed
- Waiting for obstacles to attenuate (e.g., children getting older, babysitting)

It's getting necessary (one partner sees the necessity of prioritizing the couple relationship and is confident it will happen)
- Not pursued in response to a partner's request
- Either member realizes it is necessary that more priority be given to the intimate relationship to maintain the connection
- Confidence about the project's success, at least in the long term

It's complicated (one partner is extrinsically motivated and not very committed to the project, and emphasizes the obstacles)
- Pursuing the project to please the partner, or extrinsically motivated
- Not fully committed because it's not a priority
- Emphasis on obstacles and the project's difficulty (e.g., money, babysitting, time)

Conjugal Dynamics

Of the 34 couples in the study, there were 10 in which both partners chose an MRP, and 14 in which only one partner did so. The analysis of the appraisal profiles combined with the projects' content of both partners led to the identification of four conjugal dynamics: *continuity* (*n* = 12, 50%), *when the time is right* (*n* = 5, 20.8%), *it's getting necessary* (*n* = 4, 16.7%), and *it's complicated* (*n* = 3, 12.5%).

Continuity. These couples shared the same view concerning their MRPs, while prioritizing their relationship to a variable extent. Their projects were intended to preserve the ongoing situation, to do even better in the future, or to finish something already started. Almost all couples with this conjugal dynamic were determined and optimistic about their projects. The way parents expressed their projects was an indicator of the continuity dynamic. Some had been trying to improve their situation: "We are working hard to get more time together" (F31). There were also parents who had improved over time but intended to keep improving: "We take more time together since the kids have grown older … but I'd like to have more activities alone with him" (F13), and "We're going out a lot, but it could be more" (M30). Lastly, others wanted to complete an ongoing project: "Maybe later on, because now we're taking care of the children, we'd like to finish the marriage project that we had" (M31).

When the time is right. These couples did not particularly prioritize their intimate relationship, but both partners intended to reverse the situation or develop a new MRP. They were on the same wavelength regarding their intention to give a higher priority to their relationship, but were not in continuity because they had not started yet. Both partners did prioritize a MRP among their top five personal projects, although not necessarily the same one. They wanted to start devoting more time to conjugal life: "My project would be to have activities with my spouse, because we don't and it's important" (F21). To justify why their relationship had been neglected, some alluded to a busy schedule: "We've been caught in the same routine for years, juggling with too many balls.… It's one of the projects I neglect the most" (M16). Others referred to child care requirements: "We're stuck in our parental role a lot" (M20), and "When we have time, we can't find a babysitter" (F16). For some parents, the situation was not yet too serious: "It's a matter of will and to put things in place when we really need it" (F16). For others, the situation was rather critical: "I questioned my relationship last year.… If I can't find an activity with her, I'd feel guilty not to have made the effort to win her back" (M21). Lastly, the formulation of some projects can be revealing. For example, a participant's wish to "find an activity together" (M21) implied that this couple did not spend time alone together doing an activity.

It's getting necessary. In these couples, one member, or both, had become aware that a higher priority must be given to their intimate relationship: "We have to … we're always with the kids. If we don't want things to get worse … we have no choice, we're gonna have to take time together" (F28). The expression "it's getting necessary" epitomizes the feelings of the partner who wanted to reverse the situation: they felt that their intimate relationship had been neglected for too long.

They intended to dedicate time and energy to reconnect with their partner before losing them to a break-up. Some felt that they had already grown apart: "It's often what we put at the end of the list. Maybe by putting it first, we would be more than nursing partners" (F23). One mother openly broached separation when explaining why her project is congruent with her values: "We've decided to live as a couple and we've had kids together, so we don't wanna break up for nothing … even if there're ups and downs … getting through it" (F28). These parents talked about their projects as though they were pursuing them from necessity rather than desire: "I'm aware we have to do it" (F23).

It's complicated. The fathers in these couples mentioned an MRP, although they did not seem like they actually intended to carry it out. In all cases, it was the father who listed the project and who was postponing it. They were willing to entertain the project mainly to please their partner; that is, they were extrinsically motivated: "She's been wanting to go on a trip for a while … I'm always postponing it" (M10), and "So far, I'm not putting any money in it, it's more my girlfriend's project" (M1). They particularly emphasized difficulties and constraints: "It's always really complicated to know where and when we're going, and to have a place" (M17). To the researchers, it seemed as though they were trying to find reasons to convince themselves not to pursue the project: "With all the damn passports, the hassles.… It's quite difficult.… It's not that important" (M1). Lastly, sometimes a project was described in terms that seemed to imply that the father was not strongly resolved to achieve it: "We'll try to go" (M17).

Discussion

Description of Marital Relationship Projects

The first aim of this study was to explore the priority given to MRPs by parents of a child with an intellectual disability. The findings show that half of the parents prioritized at least one. Out of 34 couples, there were only 10 in which both partners chose an MRP as one of their five most important personal projects, perhaps reflecting that the care requirements of their child, and their professional responsibilities as working parents, had militated against spending time on their partnership. Issues related to the reconciliation and prioritization of life roles do not appear to be specific to parents of a child with an intellectual disability. As noted by Li and Fung (2011), the priority associated with marital goals evolves through the family life cycle; in general, personal growth goals are particularly important for young couples and instrumental goals for those in middle adulthood, while marital relationship goals gain importance in later adulthood. In this regard, parents of a child with an intellectual disability show normative functioning trajectories throughout most of adulthood (Glidden et al., 2021).

In order of frequency, prioritized MRPs were trips, activities, couple time, and getting married. Mothers simply wanted to spend more time with their partners, while fathers planned to travel with them. As mothers still often play the role of primary caregivers in families with an intellectually disabled child (Marsh et al., 2020), mothers may be reluctant to consider travelling as a couple

because their child requires specialized care and they do not have babysitting resources they can really trust. Likewise, as Browning and colleagues (2020) have pointed out, leisure time — even for personal activities, let alone as a couple — is less frequently available when there are children at home.

Individual Appraisals

Based on the dimensions of commitment to and confidence about the realization of MRPs, four appraisal profiles emerged: determined optimists, determined sceptics, postponing optimists, and postponing sceptics. The determined, unlike the postponing, expressed willingness to make the effort required by their project, because of its meaningfulness to them. Postponing parents were much less inclined to get involved in the project, because they had other priorities or felt that circumstances were not conducive to its success. Optimists were distinguished from sceptics by their greater confidence in their project's outcome, despite anticipated difficulties. As for sceptics, they insisted that there were important obstacles for which they had no immediate solution, thus casting doubt on whether the project could be achieved.

Determined optimists: Most of the parents who prioritized an MRP were determined optimists. These MRPs may have been among their central goals, meeting their basic need for relatedness, which is essential for psychological growth and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Czyżkowska and Cieciuch (2020), both partners must carry out relationship projects to experience marital satisfaction.

Determined sceptics: These parents saw their MRPs as congruent with their values and acknowledged the importance of MRPs in maintaining the feeling of love between them, which they felt had a positive impact on family functioning. They pursued their projects despite significant hurdles. If those constraints were allowed to impede their central projects, the uncertainty regarding their project's success could eventually affect their personal and conjugal well-being. The lack of leisure time, of respite services, and of babysitting are among the recurring constraints noted by parents of a child with an intellectual disability (Norton et al., 2016). Some parents would thus benefit from supports that give them space to enrich their conjugal life. Some are likely already experiencing a certain distance from their partner and would benefit from intimacy; this is especially true for those who feel that their partner represents one of the barriers hindering their MRP.

Postponing optimists: These parents were not particularly committed to their MRPs at the time of the interview. They felt that the constraints they lived with were such that their project was not presently feasible; consequently, why should they commit themselves? They often mentioned having already made several unsuccessful attempts. They remained optimistic that their project would eventually be realized once the constraints were diminished. To cope with the situation, many parents in this position may decide to live one day at a time (Nolan et al., 1995).

Postponing sceptics: These parents, as with the postponing optimists, were not very committed to their MRPs. However, they did not necessarily plan on investing further in their MRPs in the future, because the projects were not intrinsically motivated, and often were only pursued to please their partner. Some parents felt that if they engaged in the project (which was often a trip), they would be prioritizing an activity with their partner to the detriment of other family-related projects. The concerns they experienced agree with the results of studies showing that it is important that parents of a child with an intellectual disability learn to take time for themselves without feeling guilty (Nicoll et al., 2002). If MRPs are not viable, they can eventually lose their significance (Little et al., 2007) and give rise to reassessments about conjugal life.

Conjugal Dynamics

Parents' MRPs were also analyzed from the standpoint of conjugal dynamics by considering whether the two partners listed the same projects or shared the same vision concerning projects and their life context. Four dynamics emerged: *continuity*, *when the time is right*, *it's getting necessary*, and *it's complicated*.

These typologies showed that most couples were on the same wavelength about their MRPs and seemed satisfied with their conjugal relationship. Among the *continuity* type, both partners planned to actively pursue their project and were confident they would succeed. Partners of the *when the time is right* type also shared a common perspective, but their life context did not allow them to favour MRPs at the time. They planned to devote more time to their conjugal life when conditions allowed (e.g., older children, babysitters available). Even if they were not active in MRPs at the time, these couples seemed to cooperate effectively at the family level. Following Li and Fung (2011), their actions can be considered as currently oriented towards instrumental goals (e.g., safe living environment, sufficient income) rather than marital relationship goals.

In couples characterized by the *continuity* and *when the time is right* dynamics, similarity in the mothers' and fathers' projects could have resulted from the strength of their union and their resilience in having worked through challenges such as disenchantment regarding the wish for the perfect child, and child care requirements (Bruce et al., 1994; Neece & Chan, 2017). Their cohesion and flexibility, developed through difficult situations, may explain why they are still together. Their conjugal life may have played a protective role, as highlighted by several studies among such parents (Gerstein et al., 2009; Kersh et al., 2006). Another possible explanation is that they were applying lessons learned through previous break-ups.

The two other types of conjugal dynamics, *it's getting necessary* and *it's complicated*, were found in couples who did not report sharing any MRP: only one of the two partners prioritized such projects. Regarding the *it's getting necessary type*, there was in each case one partner who felt that it was time to prioritize the relationship because it had been neglected due to the requirements of child care (mainly mothers) or professional activities (mainly fathers). This partner realized the importance of spending quality time with the other and was generally determined to engage in the MRP, recognizing the benefits for all family members. Furthermore, confidence in

the likelihood of success was high; the project was not being pursued in response to a partner's request. The awareness of the need to prioritize the relationship may have resulted from the feeling that certain limits had been reached. This could be related to inter-role conflicts — experiences resulting from the amount of time invested in certain roles (e.g., parent, worker) at the expense of others (e.g., partner, hobbyist) — and possibly to the effect those conflicts were having on relationships with family members (Kish et al., 2018). Therefore, for these couples, the MRP was aimed at changing the situation before it deteriorated or led to separation.

Unlike the *it's getting necessary* type, the *it's complicated* type found only in men, who mentioned projects involving travel or other leisure activities to please their partners. It seemed that they did not really want to engage in these projects: all of them were postponing the project, and making excuses to not carry it out; afterwards, they concluded that the project might not be a priority. As mentioned by Li and colleagues (2020), a mismatch between partners in their choice of significant projects can bring tensions into a couple's relationship by highlighting the differences in their priorities and concerns. Sharing activities with one's partner reflects a commitment to the relationship (Stanley et al., 2010).

Strengths and Limitations

This study appears to be the first to explore MRPs among parents of a child with an intellectual disability. It is worth paying attention to these projects since the choices parents make regarding what they decide to do with their partners can affect marital satisfaction and family functioning. The qualitative research design allowed us to draw in-depth portraits of the contents of their projects, as well as examine related individual appraisals and conjugal dynamics. In this population, which is vulnerable to stress and mental health issues, a better understanding of the dynamics surrounding MRPs is essential for identifying the most appropriate ways to meet their support needs. The study design also enabled to capture the perspectives of mothers and fathers from the same couples. The methodological approach ensured that the two partners did not consult each other before or during their interviews while encouraging them to feel comfortable, spontaneous, and confident by assigning an interviewer of the same sex and by arranging to meet at a place and time of their choice. These favourable conditions allowed to determine which conjugal dynamics applied in cases where partners were on the same wavelength about MRPs, and which ones applied when they were not.

Several limitations should nevertheless be noted. The first concerns the characteristics of the sample, which comprised White people living in small urban areas in Quebec, most of whom reported having sufficient income to meet their family needs. All had received services from a rehabilitation center and were hence presumably motivated and open to sharing their experience. Because the sample consists of volunteers, a self-selection bias may have skewed the findings, as those parents who refused to participate mostly blamed lack of time. Furthermore, it is possible that the presence of the interviewer affected the parents' responses and the content of the projects they listed, notably because they may not have felt comfortable talking about certain subjects. As

the nature of parents' projects is influenced by their personal, sociocultural, and economic environments, the findings may not be transferable to parents of a child with an intellectual disability who come from other backgrounds. Moreover, some parents were surprised that this research focused on their own projects instead of their child's; in fact, this focus seems to have made them aware that pursuing their own projects was a possibility for them. Since most of these parents were focused on child care, some found it difficult even to state personal projects. As no studies addressing MRPs among the general population were found, it is difficult to characterize the impact on a couple's MRPs of having a child with an intellectual disability. Lastly, the findings portray MRPs of couples at a particular moment in their life course; the present study thus did not allow to determine the factors leading parents to initiate, revise, continue, finalize, or abandon the MRPs that are important to them or their partners.

Future Directions

More research is needed to understand more broadly the effect of contextual factors on the MRPs of parents of a child with an intellectual disability. Because couples also prioritized other types of project (e.g., buying a property), and since each partner can support projects of the other (e.g., pursuing studies), the analysis of parents' projects could be extended in future research to all their projects, leading to a better understanding of their conjugal dynamics. As personal expectations regarding conjugal life can vary between individuals and over time, research aimed at exploring projects according to family life trajectories, key moments in one's life course (e.g., child's entry into school, transition to adulthood), or characteristics of one's child with an intellectual disability (e.g., age, sex, behavioural problems) would be relevant. Such research could explore the conjugal dynamics that contribute to the development of attachment and cohesion, as well as those that might lead to the dissolution of relationships or those that result from the formation of new unions.

Practical Implications

This study has several potential practical implications. The analysis of MRPs provides valuable information on the self-determination of parents of a child with an intellectual disability. Designing interventions around projects may be a way to increase parents' empowerment, enhance their agency, and hence enable them to shape their own development and well-being. When encouraged to set meaningful goals and monitor their own progress, parents may gain a better understanding of their adaptation processes and develop awareness of their difficulties and specific needs. The awareness of the appraisals parents make about their projects could help them question their underlying motivations, discuss them with their partner, and get involved in more intrinsic projects, thus enhancing the quality of their intimate relationship.

Identifying important projects that have *sceptical* or *postponing* appraisals may help professionals to identify parents' particular vulnerabilities and thus be able to help prevent future difficulties. It would be appropriate to work with sceptics to increase their feelings of control and self-efficacy towards their projects, either by offering support to remove barriers or, when needed,

by coaching them to revise their projects until they can perceive them as more realistic. Among postponing parents, constraints linked to respite care and babysitting were often mentioned; these can prevent parents from prioritizing and realizing shared marital relationship goals. Therefore, support should be provided to attenuate these hindrances and provide parents with time together. Considering the challenges these parents face in obtaining space for MRPs, it might be beneficial to divide their projects into smaller ones, or into smaller steps, to prevent exhaustion.

Exploring conjugal dynamics in MRPs could help professionals understand how a couple functions, notably in regard to partners' similarities or dissimilarities in their perception of constraints, and how distress and relationship difficulties may arise. It could also allow professionals to capture how couples coordinate their actions in relation to their projects. A considerable mismatch between partners in the way they prioritize their projects could lead to conflicts and impede their self-actualization. Resources and interventions focused on communication and dyadic coping strategies may help these couples achieve their prioritized projects, and thus strengthen their relationship cohesion. By recognizing high-risk relationship profiles in couples through understanding conjugal dynamics in MRPs, professionals may be able to assess a couples' particular vulnerabilities more accurately.

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