

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Couple's Entrepreneurship: Who Loves me Follows me

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Abstract

By mobilizing the theoretical field of decision-making and the empirical study of 15 cases, this article highlights and analyzes the recurrence of conjugal interactions leading to the decision to undertake as a couple. The results show that the spouse who initiates the project becomes the 'leader', while the other positions himself, more or less voluntarily, as a 'follower'. This decision-making configuration induces a renunciation on the part of the follower; a follower who remains, still today, overwhelmingly the woman. The discussion considers the potential impact of this specific decision-making process on the future governance of the company, in terms of the distribution of roles and powers, the satisfaction of spouses, but also the choice of partner. The movement of the reflexive cursor in a period prior to the copreneurial installation enriches the field of research, almost unexplored, of the decision to undertake as a couple, opens the way to the study of problems of copreneurship through the innovative prism of events that have occurred before its implementation and offers practitioners new keys to understanding the complex dynamics within which they evolve.

Keywords: *Family business; Decision; Copreneurs; Entrepreneurship; Couple; Leader; Follower*

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In 2014, in an article entitled 'Femmes d'exception' (exceptional women), a French magazine drew up portraits of 10 women it considered met this description. Among them was Françoise Holder, who was introduced at the beginning of the article as follows:

Françoise Holder created the company of the same name when she was only 20 years old. In this adventure, which today has an international dimension through the Paul and Ladurée brands, she was not alone, since there were and still are two of them. Francis Holder was 23 years old. While she was studying law and dreaming of becoming a magistrate, Françoise Holder finally devoted herself to the accounting and administrative side of her husband's business, who was a baker.¹

This path can be put into perspective with those described in the academic study by Bertaux-Wiame (1982) on the installation of baker couples. In this article, the author analyzes several empirical cases highlighting a decision-making process for entering into marital entrepreneurship that is exactly identical

to that described in the article of the period: the dream of an apprentice baker of one day becoming his own boss, meeting a potential wife who is asked to follow him and help him realize his dream, the future wife's renunciation of her own professional aspirations, and, finally, setting up with 'the husband in the bakery and the wife running the shop'.

These examples lead us to question this model where the wife gives up her own aspirations to allow her husband to fulfill his professional ambitions. Today, when gender equality is at the heart of social concerns and women's independence and free choice as to their professional future seem at worst tolerated and at best encouraged and valued, the examination of the decision-making process leading two spouses to undertake a business venture as a couple is more relevant than ever.

Entrepreneurial couples, also known as copreneurs² per Barnett and Barnett (1988), are married or unmarried partners who share the ownership and management of a business. Despite their economic importance, it was not until the 1980s that academic work on the subject began to emerge. Several lines of research were then explored: marital/entrepreneurial

¹ Boyer, G. (2014, January 28th), Françoise Holder; son expérience professionnelle au service des femmes. *Femme actuelle*. URL: <https://www.femmeactuelle.fr/actu/dossiers-d-actualite/francoise-holder-son-experience-au-service-des-femmes-16688>

² The term 'copreneur' is used in this article as a generic term. It refers equally to a man or a woman.

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relationship interactions (Kadis & McClendon, 1991; Marshack, 1993), power distribution (Hedberg & Danes, 2012; Ponthieu & Caudill, 1993), conflict management (Danes & Olson, 2003; Foley & Powell, 1997), the contours of the notion of copreneurship (Fitzgerald & Muske, 2002; Fletcher, 2010), the longitudinal evolution of the copreneurial firm (Chyi-Lyi & Dunn, 2009; Muske & Fitzgerald, 2006), the place of women in this context (Lee et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2006), the success factors (Farrington et al., 2011; Jang & Danes, 2013) or the performance of the copreneurial firm (Amore et al., 2017; Brannon et al., 2013).

However, as interesting as they are, this research remains focused on the strategic and operational phase of an already existing copreneurship. None of the research examines the cognitive process that led these couples, prior to setting up, to consider the copreneurial experience. While some motivational determinants are addressed in a few studies (Chyi-Lyi & Dunn, 2009; Fletcher, 2010), these analyses do not refer to the decision-making processes involved in the choice of entrepreneurship for couples.

This lack of studies on the decision to set up a copreneurial business converges with the lack of studies on the decision to set up a business, whatever its form. This is all the more surprising given that this decision is truly at the heart of the business creation process (Bernard & Dubard Barbosa, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2015). Moreover, studies on copreneurship rarely focus on the couples' individual approaches. The satisfaction of the particular interests of each of the protagonists, sometimes to the detriment of the other protagonist's interests, is a subject that seems to be overlooked, even though it constitutes a determining element in the decision-making process.

In order to better understand these dimensions, this study proposes to answer the following research question: how does each spouse position themselves in the decision-making process leading to a business venture as a couple?

At the theoretical level, an exploration through the innovative prism of the *ex ante*, that is, pre-copreneurship, highlights a decision-making process of entry into copreneurship subject to a certain recurrence, and whose characteristics and implications for each spouse we identify.

On a practical level, this article aims to contribute to the knowledge that entrepreneurial couples have of their world by submitting them to a new angle of approach, examining the pre-entrepreneurial aspect. Copreneurial dynamics are no longer viewed solely through the prism of the contemporary context of the enterprise but also through the prism of determinants prior to its creation. As a result, copreneurs benefit from new keys to understanding their entrepreneurial life, keys that they can use to better meet the challenges and/or better counter the tensions they face.

The proposed reflection is based on the theoretical foundations of decision-making (1) and is based on 15 case studies, carried out and analyzed using a qualitative research methodology (2). The results are presented (3) and discussed (4) in the light of these theoretical and empirical data. The conclusion reviews the conceptual and managerial contributions of the research and suggests avenues for further reflection.

Theoretical basis

The study of decision-making is the cornerstone of organizational science (Hodgkinson & Starbuck, 2008). It has therefore given rise to a great deal of work, ranging from the more general work on decision-making in organizational theory to the more specific work on decision-making in the specific case of co-entrepreneurship, including work on decision-making in entrepreneurship. All these works constitute the theoretical basis of this research.

Decision-making in organizational theory

'The journey of the concept of decision making in organization theory is linked to the slow erosion, or even revocation, of the principle of rationality' (Germain & Lacolley, 2012, p. 47). The concept of bounded rationality (March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1955) has highlighted the existence of decision biases that 'distract' the actual decision from the optimal decision as defined in neoclassical theory. Indeed, choices depend on the evaluation of their consequences in terms of the actors' preferences and favor a 'logic of consequentiality' linked to conceptions of anticipation, analysis and calculation (March & Simon, 1958).

Following on from these analyses, bounded rationality is taken into account by the theory of social exchange (Blau, 1968; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) when it posits that individuals act in society by virtue of an exchange process in which each person tries to satisfy their own interest. For each of their decisions, individuals make a utility calculation equal to the difference between the estimated financial and, above all, socio-emotional gains and costs of the resulting situation. Socio-emotional costs are those elements of relational life that have a negative or constraining impact on the person, while socio-emotional gains are those that have a positive impact on a person and are experienced as pleasant and satisfying. The largely emotional dimension of decisions is also highlighted by several authors (Berthoz, 2003; Damasio, 1994). Their choices will be directed towards outcomes that seem to them to potentially yield the highest utility, that is, the situations that they consider to provide them with the greatest rewards and the lowest costs (White & Klein, 2002).

Cyert and March (1963) also support the developments on bounded rationality by specifying that the decision-making process is not linear but, on the contrary, marked by mechanisms of conflict, negotiation and compromise, with the aim of reconciling the respective interests, motivations and objectives of the various stakeholders. The decision is built progressively through interactions until a final result that is ideally satisfactory to all. It is the result of a social construct that leads the individual to regulate his reasoning and to go beyond their initial perceptions (Doise, 1993).

Finally, instead of an optimal rational choice, decision-makers opt for a compromise deemed satisfactory (Simon, 1955) in the light of the social constraints within which they operate (Cyert & March, 1963) and the utility calculation they make (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). They are thus part of a logic of reciprocal giving (Mauss, 1923) in which everyone finds their interest, a logic particularly at work in the entrepreneurial field as shown by the work of Ferrary (2003) or André et al. (2017). This general approach is in line with what appears in the particular case of entrepreneurial decision making.

The entrepreneurial decision in the entrepreneurship literature

In entrepreneurship, according to Hernandez (2006), there are a limited number of works that focus on the decision to start a business, although there are some interesting studies such as that by Dubard Barbosa (2014). The few models that do exist are all based on a microeconomic approach, which considers, as in organizational theory, the decision to start a business as the result of a utility calculation. They show that the individual bases their decision on a comparison between the expected remuneration as an entrepreneur and the remuneration received as an employee (Casson, 1991). Entrepreneurship is therefore a response to a utility outcome deemed more satisfactory than that of salaried work (Campbell, 1992; Shepherd, 2011). The utility calculation incorporates variables related to the personality (Eisenhauer, 1995), career choices (Douglas & Shepherd, 2000), life stage (Lévesque et al., 2002) or gender (Ahl, 2006; Guiso & Rustichini, 2011) of the protagonists.

An interesting nuance is also provided by effectuation theory (Sarasvathy, 2001; Silberzahn, 2016), which builds on the theory of acceptable losses and confirms the work of organizational theorists on bounded rationality in decision making by showing that the evaluation of the calculus related to the decision to start a business is rarely obvious from the outset but often becomes clearer as opportunities and contextual elements gradually appear. In a complex systemic context such as that of entrepreneurship, the decision-making progression is often conjunctive, cumulative, and incremental, notably due to the multiplicity of actors and, consequently, of roles and

interests, both internal and external (Bérard, 2009). The final decision to set up a business is therefore also subject to a progressive analysis by the entrepreneurs, which could be likened to the pendulum swing between action and reflection in the abductive approach. In this respect, Krueger et al. (2000) point out that some entrepreneurs intend to start a business long before they look for opportunities, and Patel and Fiet (2009) show that the more people are in a 'systematic search' for direct or indirect information about starting a business, the more they will eventually decide to do so.

Finally, the work on dual leadership emphasizes the specificities of governance, particularly in terms of decision-making, in binomial teams. They highlight the fact that divergent interests and priorities between the two team members can be a recurrent source of conflict in the decision-making process (Reid & Karambayya, 2009).

Some authors also note the need to take into account the influence of the family and its evolution on individuals' work opportunities. Smaller and less socially active contemporary family structures modify the processes of resource mobilization and impact on the entrepreneurial decision (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). In this vein, Ruef et al. (2003) show that individuals very frequently rely on strong ties (family or marital) when they decide to undertake team ventures, thus maintaining a high degree of homophily. In parallel, research on family firms focuses on the factors of decision quality in the case of family leadership shared between several family members (Deschamps & Cisneros, 2012) as well as on the role of material resources, skill diversity, and strategic leadership as determinants of the success of sibling teams (Farrington et al., 2012). However, binomial teams of spouses remain a special case since the marital bond responds to different mechanisms than the family or friendship bond.

The entrepreneurial decision in the specific case of copreneurship

Studies on copreneurship have rarely focused on the decision-making processes implemented by copreneurs. When they have approached them, they have been studied in the context of broader topics, such as power relationships, and always downstream from the onset of copreneurship. Wicker and Burley (1991), for example, look at the respective influences of men and women in family and business decisions. They show a greater influence of the man in business-related decisions and a greater influence of the woman in family-related decisions. Ponthieu and Caudill (1993, p. 3) investigate 'who is the boss in co-entrepreneurial firms'. They show that the man is seen as the boss but that this does not necessarily affect considerations of equality in the couple. Hedberg and Danes (2012) look at the power among copreneurs when

deciding on a change for the company. They suggest that there be a link between the distribution of power among copreneurs and the success of the firm. Finally, Hirigoyen and Villéger (2019) show that although the man is considered the official decision-maker, behind the scenes the woman holds at least as much power as the man in the decision-making process.

Furthermore, the only article explicitly referring to copreneurship entry is Muske and Fitzgerald (2006). However, the research question does not concern the decision-making interactions between copreneurs regarding the setup. The objective of the article is simply to determine the characteristics of copreneurs who, once they have entered co-contracting, manage to stay in it. The results show that the most successful copreneurs are those who are older, better educated, and more ambitious. Finally, the two studies by Bertaux-Wiame (1982, 2004) are close to the subject of this article, but they focus only on the setting-up of an artisanal bakery and only on cases where it is the wife who joins the husband in his project: the process of the decision to go into business is not studied as such. It is more the role of the wife in the realization of her husband's entrepreneurial project that is discussed. The author distinguishes between three types of involvement: wives who occupy a visible place in the business, in the same way as their husbands (but the possible abandonment of their own career path is only briefly mentioned); wives who participate in the management of the business but occupy a less visible place; and finally, wives who do not work in the business but who can be considered as supporting their husbands due to the security of the salary they have outside of the business. In the latter case, the wife does not work with her husband, so it is not a case of copreneurship.

Thus, the literature is not very extensive on decision-making among copreneurship and is totally silent on the decision to be a copreneur. Consequently, the question of the positioning of each of the spouses in this decision-making process deserves to be investigated.

Methodology

This research is based on empirical investigations carried out from 2014 to 2017. Fifteen case studies of copreneurial enterprises were carried out using a qualitative methodology of data collection, coding, and analysis.

Choosing a qualitative research methodology

Copreneurship theorists have noted that the forces that govern behavior are best understood through a qualitative approach, especially in a complex environment of entangled family and entrepreneurial spheres (Zahra & Sharma, 2004). This observation has led some researchers to advocate the

development and multiplication of empirical studies on 'the life experiences and relational dynamics of coentrepreneurs' (Blenkinsopp & Owens, 2010, p. 364). The qualitative research methodology was thus chosen because it offers 'direct contact between content and meaning' by recognizing the actor's logic as a 'logic of meaning and existence' (Baby, 1992, p. 15), meaning being defined as a certain way of looking at the world, a particular logic that underlies the behaviors, attitudes, and representations of an individual or a community, gives them a specific orientation, and guarantees their coherence.

More specifically, the case study method (Yin, 1993) was chosen because it allows us to account for the complexity of a situation (Gavard-Perret et al., 2012; Stake, 1995), in this case the copreneurial situation and to grasp 'the subjective and intersubjective meaning of the situation, based on the perceptions and actions of the various actors involved' (Hlady Rispal, 2002, p. 62).

Selection of the sample

The selected sample consists of 15 copreneurial firms. Following the recommendations of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Miles and Huberman (2003), the cases selected correspond to a variety of situations. The characteristics of the studied firms differ in terms of the duration of the copreneurship, the actuality of the copreneurship (still existing or completed), the field of activity, the number of employees, and the geographical location (Table 1). The characteristics of the couples studied are different in terms of age (from 30 to 95 years), number of years of conjugality (from 8 to 70 years), current conjugal situation (separated or still together), and number of children (Table 2). This diversity of the sample makes this research part of a 'synchronic approach' (Hlady Rispal, 2002, p. 80), comparing the same phenomenon, from different perspectives, in several sites. Patton (1990) states that the more diverse the sample, the more confidence the researcher can have in the concepts that emerge.

The sample size was positively validated by two converging elements. Firstly, the need to limit the number of cases (a maximum of 10 according to Yin, 1993), in order to meet the requirements of rigor and quality of qualitative analysis. Secondly, the arrival at the saturation stage, at which point incremental learning becomes minimal and the researcher judges that the latest documents, interviews, or observations no longer provide sufficiently new or different information to justify an increase in empirical material (Pires, 1997).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were carried out, leaving a lot of room for spontaneity and free expression on behalf of the

Table 1. Characteristics of the companies studied

Company	Duration of the copreneurship	Field of activity	Number of employees	Department
#1	1947–1992	Manufacture and sale of kitchen furniture	88	17
#2	2004–Today	Building painting	33	33
#3	1979–Today	Public works	9	33
#4	1995–2015	Laying of floor coverings	21	33
#5	2008–Today	Bodywork	5	33
#6	1980–2014	Sale of bicycle accessories	2	47
#7	1982–2014	Electricity and air conditioning	12	47
#8	2001–Today	Printing	8	47
#9	2012–Today	Plumbing	18	33
#10	1991–2009	Supermarket	35	44
#11	2011–Today	Restaurant	2	83
#12	1990–1997	Clothing sales	0	17
#13	2016–Today	Bowling	10	17
#14	2006–2013	Real estate agency	0	17
#15	1990–Today	Castle/vineyard	23	33

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2. Characteristics of the couples studied

Company	First name female /male	Age female /male	Number of years of conjugality (married or not)	Current situation (separate = S or together = T)	Number of children
#1	Andrée and Michel	95/95	70	T	3
#2	Valérie and Loïc	45/47	10*	T	2
#3	Vivianne and Henri	68/70	48	T	2
#4	Océane and Jean-Luc	62/65	19*	T	4
#5	Martine and Eric	44/42	18	T	2
#6	Nicole and Jean-Noël	59/60	30	T	2
#7	Lydia and Alain	59/66	34*	T	4
#8	Patricia and Xavier	52/55	27	T	3
#9	Céline and Nicolas	35/36	15	T	2
#10	Nathalie and Thomas	48/52	25	T	2
#11	Mayling and Stéphane	32/44	8	T	2
#12	Danielle and Didier	44/49	10	S	1
#13	Cindy and Fabien	30/51	9*	T	1
#14	Lisa and Mickaël	35/45	9	S	2
#15	Florence and Daniel	61/65	40	T	2

Note: * means that it is a second union.

Source: Own elaboration.

interviewees. The main themes to be discussed were predefined, with corresponding questions, but the interview was guided mainly by the interviewees' answers and the questions they raised for the interviewer. The shortest interviews lasted about 1.5 h, the longest 3 h. Altogether, this resulted in more than 40 h of audio recordings.

The interview guide formed part of a general objective to contribute to the knowledge of copreneurial governance. The

topics covered ranged from the history of the business, to the vision of succession, to the history of the couple, to the sharing of responsibilities, to the support of the spouse, to the exploration of business/couple boundaries, to the advantages/disadvantages of copreneurship, and to the personality of the spouses. The results of this study are largely derived from the responses to the first question asked: 'Can you tell me the story of your business?'

All interviews were conducted face to face, in line with the recommendations of Ponthieu and Caudill (1993) who note that research on copreneurship is sorely lacking in face-to-face empirical studies. This method of data collection appears to guarantee the quality of the results. In addition to the certainty of the respondent's identity, face-to-face interviews allow interviewers and interviewees to establish a closeness and level of trust that does not exist in other settings (Santiago, 2000). Interactions by peripheral means (telephone, e-mail) create a distancing that generates minimal involvement of the individual and deprives the researcher of the nonverbal information linked to the discourse, even though it represents, according to Mehrabian and Ferris (1967), 93% of the message transmitted.

In the interests of rigor and quality of the results, it also appeared essential that both copreneurs be interviewed. On this subject, Wicker and Burley (1991) regret that in their study, only the women copreneurs were interviewed, as the men were less available. Indeed, few studies succeed in collecting data from the viewpoint of male copreneurs. In the interests of neutrality and of excluding a feminine-centered analysis, one of the original contributions of the article is therefore to analyze a decision-making process not only from the perspective of the wife but also from that of the husband and thus to focus the reflection on the overall dynamic and not on the positioning of women in relation to men. Moreover, in the limitations of their research, Brannon et al. (2013, p. 129) also note that 'it may be inappropriate to collect data from only one of the two spouses'. In general, several authors point to the value of a research protocol that brings together the perspectives of both copreneurs (Kirkwood, 2009; Lewis & Massey, 2011).

Furthermore, the choice was made to collect the testimonies simultaneously, in the presence of both spouses.³ The aim was to obtain a rare and rich empirical material: rare because this interview configuration is almost absent from the literature, notably because of the additional organizational difficulties that it induces; rich because it offers a physical image of the functioning of the couple and of the interactions of the spouses, an image that in our opinion is as instructive as the discourse itself. The effacement of one of the spouses in relation to the other, or on the contrary the balance of time and speaking time, the reactions (verbal and non-verbal) to the other's words are all extremely valuable clues in the analysis of decision-making interactions.⁴

³ Except for the two separated couples. In these two cases, the ex-spouses preferred to answer the questions separately.

⁴ We are aware that some spouses may feel freer to express themselves if the other is not present. Nevertheless, we still chose to use the dual mode for the reasons outlined above. However, a future research avenue could consist of modifying this research protocol by interviewing both spouses separately.

Data coding and analysis

Data coding is based on the inductive approach described in Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 2003) with the creation of heuristic grids, code occurrence charts, and theme dictionaries.

Data analysis is based on the abductive mode of inference, consisting of back and forth between empirical material and theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Fann, 1970; Koenig, 1993; Peirce, 1958). The iterative loop of abduction leads the researcher to interpret the collected data with regard to theories and theories with regard to data. The discourse analysis method (Garric et al., 2006; Seignour, 2011) was used. Thus, the semantic and lexical fields, the modes of argumentation and legitimation, the structuring of the discourse, the verbal forms, the occurrences, the system of enunciation, the way in which the sender involves themselves in their production and implicates their addressee in it are all elements that were identified and analyzed with the conviction that they were both carriers and revelators of meaning (cf. extracts from the coding and analysis grids in the Appendix). This method is based on the hypothesis that the discourse is a 'reality of reality' (von Foerster, 1981) in the sense that it participates in itself, through the way it is conducted, in the creation of the reality it describes.

Results

Four main results emerged from the analysis. Firstly, in the decision-making process leading to copreneurship, one of the spouses positions themselves as a 'leader' and the other as a 'follower'. Secondly, the decision to become a copreneur implies a renunciation for the follower spouse, with the positioning as follower spouse being influenced by gender-related considerations. Finally, the choice of spouse is a determining element in the joint venture decision process.

In the decision-making process leading to starting a business as a couple, one spouse is the leader and the other is the follower

Through the prism of inductive inference, the first stage of the abductive approach, when listening to and analyzing the discourses, the observation of the existence of a leading spouse and a following spouse in the decision-making process of entering into copreneurship appeared to us in an undeniable and inescapable way.

All the copreneurs, without exception, used the lexical field of follow-up in their speech (about 30 occurrences). This finding is all the more striking because the paucity of the literature on this point had not encouraged us to use the lexical field of monitoring in our interview guide. None of the questions

were oriented in this direction. In most cases, it is the answer to the first question of the interview – ‘Can you tell me the history of your company?’ – that triggers the appearance of the follow-up discourse.

Moreover, in 12 of the 15 cases studied, this reference to the follow-up of one of the spouses occurs in the first five minutes of the interview and, for several of them, from the very first sentence they utter. This emphasis on form is reinforced by the meaning of the statements on substance. In all the speeches, the monitoring of one of the spouses seems to be the *sine qua non* of the co-production process, a condition summed up in a clear but revealing way by Patricia (#8): ‘If the wife does not follow at that moment, it is dead in the water’.

The study of the reactionary interactions of the copreneurs also confirms the positioning identified in the discourses. The follower spouses are in the background compared to the leaders, whether in terms of taking and speaking time or in the occupation of space. The most revealing example is that of Viviane (#3), who is very talkative at the beginning of the interview when Henri has not yet arrived and then withdraws into a quasi-total silence from the moment her husband makes his entrance. As for the occupation of space, she chooses to sit on a chair next to the desk, leaving the black leather armchair behind the desk free and replies vigorously and in a slightly outraged tone to the researcher asking her why she does not sit behind the desk or in the armchair: ‘Oh no! I wouldn’t allow myself! But that’s normal... I followed my husband ... he’s the boss’.

This first result highlights three main dimensions in the distinct decision-making processes of the follower and the leader: These processes are interrelated, marked by antagonism, asynchrony, and interdependence.

- A psychological dimension first of all, which is reflected in the strong lexical opposition that structures the discourses and underlines the antagonism between the project of one and the other (‘I was the opposite’ #1). On the one hand, there is the leader, who ‘wanted’ the copreneurship (25 occurrences of the verb ‘to want’ in the selected sentences with, in case 1 for example, five occurrences in the first seven sentences). On the other hand, the follower ‘didn’t want’ (#7, #9, etc.), ‘didn’t feel like it’ (#14), ‘would have preferred’ (#1) or ‘would have liked’ (#1) another way, ‘didn’t join at the beginning’ because he ‘didn’t like it’ (#3). In case 3, when the wife is asked to ‘tell the story of her business’, her first reaction is to say: ‘It was my husband who wanted to be the boss one day’. The decision-making pattern is expressed identically in case 2 (Valerie: ‘It’s up to him... It will be his project but I will follow him’), case 6 (Jean-Noël: ‘Yes ... well, she followed me...’; Nicole: ‘Yes, but it’s her project’), case 12 (Danielle: ‘I followed him... He

was the one who absolutely wanted to set up something... I followed...’), and case 13 (Fabien: ‘I followed her...’). The follower spouses thus begin by clearly positioning themselves as outsiders to the project, a positioning accentuated by a discourse marking the opposition between ‘me’ and ‘him’ or ‘her’ (‘I would have preferred’ #1; ‘I was a nurse’ #3; ‘I loved my company’ #4; ‘I didn’t want to leave my company’ #7; ‘I was doing very well’ #7; ‘I lived it well, I liked what I was doing’ #7; ‘I was young’ #12; ‘I followed it’ #13; ‘I wanted to keep my companies’ #15). The desire to highlight the initial exteriority of the project can also be detected in the reactionary interactions of the copreneurs, as for example in case 13, where it is Fabien who immediately responds by indicating his initial non-adherence to the project, whereas the question was addressed to Cindy by name.

- A chronological dimension: the copreneurship project cannot appear at exactly the same time in the minds of the two spouses. In practice, two configurations exist: either one of the two partners already has a business and the other comes to ‘graft’ onto the existing structure (cases 2, 4, 5, 7, and 10) or the two partners decide to create or buy a business together (cases 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15). In the first configuration, the copreneur who arrives later effectively follows the founder’s project. In the second configuration, the idea is necessarily initially thought up and/or suggested by one of the two, even if the second immediately adheres to it. The decision to set up a joint venture cannot be taken at precisely the same moment. Chronologically, the follow-up of one of the spouses is therefore necessarily inherent to the decision to set up as a couple. In the most advanced cases, one of the two spouses has been dreaming about it since he was very young, without having yet met his future partner (Daniel, #15, speaks of the realization of a ‘childhood dream’ when he talks about his copreneurship).
- A geographical dimension. In our study, Andrée leaves the Paris region to follow Michel to Charente-Maritime (#1), Nathalie joins Thomas in England (#10), and Mayling (#11), who was born and had always lived in Cuba, leaves her country and family to follow Stéphane to France. When the psychological and chronological dimensions are coupled with a geographical dimension, the consequences of his choice are often amplified for the follower. He then insists on the difficulty he had in leaving his original environment and on the nostalgia, even the pain, that this distance implied (‘we lived in Meudon [...], it was good’, ‘I would have had an easier and quieter life if I had stayed’, ‘it’s not easy to go from Parisian life to a small village in Charente! It was a real

backwater! I had to get used to it...'. #1; 'I miss my family [...], my friends [...], a lot' #11).

In the decision-making process leading to starting a business as a couple, there is a renunciation on the part of the follower spouse

In the 15 cases studied, renunciation appears in the discourse of the follower spouses. For them, the renunciation most often consists of abandoning their own professional trajectory ('I closed my business' #4; 'I resigned' #6 and #9; 'I sold my business' #7), as well as the material advantages ('You go from an executive's salary to starting out from scratch ... it was difficult all the same' #3; 'You don't necessarily earn a very good living right from the start' #8) and the related emotional advantages ('I lost my customers to whom I was attached. For some I knew their whole life, I had accompanied them for 15 years, they had seen me pregnant, I knew their children, I was invited to their wedding' #2). They also insist on unfulfilled career opportunities ('I had my habits, I had known my colleagues for 15 years, everything was going very well, including with my bosses... I had chances of getting a big promotion in the years to come' #5).

But the renunciation can also be made in an area of competence. In case 9, Céline explains:

Initially, we had both taken the marketing course at Sup de Co Grenoble ... we realized very quickly that with two degrees in marketing, we were not complementary ... so I had to change direction as soon as I finished school [...]. Initially, I didn't want to go into finance ... but I finally chose finance to keep up with it and adapt as best I can.

Furthermore, the renunciation is often embodied by a loss of security ('I was giving up some security' #3). The lexical field of risk is then highlighted ('I would have liked him to have been less of a risk-taker, for us to quietly remain civil servants' #1; 'It was still risky to leave this job' #5; 'It was a risky decision all the same' #8), and the semantics of risk is often supported by formulations that mark, in content and form, the opposition between the two psychologies of the spouses ('You, Michel, are an adventurer' #1; 'it was much more adventurous', 'I have my feet on the ground' #3; 'but I remained prudent' #5; 'it was her folly' #13).

In the psychological dimension, the followers also underline the difficulty of giving up by insisting on the attachment they had to their former situation. The lexical field of love is then clearly identifiable and amplified by numerous repetitions ('I loved my job a lot you know ... a lot...' #3; 'I loved my company' #4; 'I loved [my work] a lot' #5; 'Her company, she was the one who created it, it was her baby' #7; 'I liked what I was doing [...], I liked it [...], it was going very well..., I enjoyed it a

lot ... I liked it very much ... I had a lot of people' #7). The difficulty of the task is also reflected in vocabulary with negative connotations ('it wasn't easy' #1; 'it was still difficult' #3; 'it caused quite a few problems' #7, etc.), which can go as far as to take on the meaning of the term 'difficulty', which can even take on a sacrificial dimension ('I had the impression of sacrificing myself for the company' #5; 'it made him happy' #6; 'at the beginning, there are still concessions to be made', 'Oh yes, in principle, I'd rather take care of the other part, that's for sure ... but that's how it is...' #8). Dedication then sometimes leads to devotion ('and then, my husband [...] needed me...' #3; 'I could see that Eric was not well [...]. I told Eric that I was going to help him because I had all the administrative skills that he didn't have [...]. We said I had to leave my job because the company needed me more and more'. #5; 'He needed me [...]. It was still better for the company...' #8).

Céline (#9) even goes so far as to speak of 'mourning' when referring to her renunciation. Indeed, a process similar to that of mourning (Bah, 2009; Pailot, 1996) seems to be experienced by many of the followers. The emotional charge is heavy (non-verbal communication characterized by numerous hesitations, long silences, frequent pauses, slow speech, a sad, nostalgic tone, dreamy eyes). The subject can even become taboo, surrounded by opacity, with strongly internalized feelings about it ('Well, I'm not going to tell you everything, but let's just say that yes... I followed him' #3; 'If you really want to know everything...' #12). Resilience sometimes takes time. For example, Viviane (#3) says in the course of a sentence: 'I am a nurse' or 'My eldest daughter is like me; she became a nurse', even though, in fact, Viviane has not practiced this profession for over 30 years. The grieving process can also lead to anger or resentment towards the leader. Vivianne (case 2) reveals that giving up her nursing career led to a long period of marital tension. Alain (case 7), who forced his wife to give up her own business, also admits: 'It caused a lot of problems, she blamed me for years'.

Finally, in terms of time, the renunciation is more or less progressive. In some cases, the assignment to the copreneurial project is made abruptly by the leader. In case 4, for example, Océane explains: 'My husband said to me: 'You're going to close this company' ... I loved my company ... and it was doing very well [...]. He said to me: 'We're going to ask Mireille to take early retirement and you're going to go and do a little training and you're going to take care of all the administration and replace Mireille'. So I closed my business and followed him'. The renunciation here has a strongly imperative character, reinforced by the use of the pronoun 'me' (it's not 'you're going to close this business' but 'you're going to close this business for me'), which can be seen as the translation of an action to be done for the benefit of her husband ('you're going to close this business for me'). The injunction takes the form of an absence of alternatives for Océane, especially as the process for his wife

to then join his company has already been meticulously planned by Jean-Luc. She will have to give up not only her company but also her initial field of competence since he has planned for her to go through 'a little training course' (should we detect in the use of the adjective 'little' a form of contempt for the future work for which he has lined up for her?).

In other cases, the renunciation is not explicitly requested. It is done gradually, almost insidiously ('let's say it was done gradually ... [...] It was done like that ... but gradually ... very gradually...' #3). It is not the result of a radical decision precisely situated in time. The help is initially ad hoc, then gradually becomes a fully fledged workload for the follower ('So in fact, at the beginning, I wasn't supposed to go much ... even hardly at all ... that was the plan ... and then, very quickly, I saw that he needed me so little by little I started to get involved' #8; 'So in fact, what happened was that at the beginning I came from time to time to help Nicolas with the invoicing part ... and then, little by little, the company grew ... there was more and more work...' #9). The initial dedication seems to evolve into an impossibility of withdrawal ('and then afterwards, once you're there, it's over... It's over because, ..., very quickly, everyone is waiting for you' #8). For these follower spouses, the discourse suggests that the benevolent and altruistic help they agree to provide at the beginning is insidiously but quickly transformed into a trap that closes in on them.

This determinism forms the backdrop to the speeches of several follower spouses. The use of the lexical field of the absence of alternative ('I had to leave my job' #5; 'He insisted a lot' #6; 'No, it was impossible ... we couldn't do everything', 'I had no choice!' #7; 'I had to [...] follow him' #8) gives the feeling that the followers do not feel totally in control of their fate. Their speeches are marked by fatalism and resignation ('but that's how it is' #8). They seem to be subject to a constraining superior force (social pressure, marital pressure, etc.), against which they cannot fight. They are part of an external locus of control (in the sense of Rotter, 1954), considering that their destiny is dictated by events outside their will, over which they have no control.⁵ This is Viviane's position (#3) when she says, in the passive form: 'They wrote me off', to explain the circumstances of the end of her nursing career. She places herself as a passive actor in the redhibitory act, omitting to recall that it is only the logical consequence, and known upstream, of her 'forgetting' to send back the form requesting the renewal of her availability. The normally involuntary nature of an oversight reinforces the external locus of control and the question of the missed act can be raised.

Finally, the determinism is at its height when, to describe her integration into the company, Viviane (#3) uses a vocabulary

(still in the passive form) referring to all the constraints and imperative of military commitment: 'I was enlisted'.

In the decision-making process leading to starting a business as a couple, the positioning as a follower spouse is influenced by gender-related considerations

In 13 of the 15 cases studied, the woman is the follower spouse (only cases 13 and 14 are exceptions). It is she who gives up her own aspirations to follow her partner's project.

In addition to the copreneurial project, maternal considerations are often put forward ('I was exhausted, I was reaching saturation point with the business plus my job and the two children to manage [...]. We said to ourselves that we couldn't go on like that, that I had to quit my job' #5; 'When I had my fourth child I said to him: we can't go on like that' #7; 'And then, in the meantime, we had children: the two eldest who are twins ... and the organization was starting to become very complicated', 'We said that I would have time for the children and also to be a little cooler' #8). It seems that the management of children remains a primarily female concern, which has a decisive influence on a woman's career path and, in the case of the copreneurs, leads her to take a back seat in the entrepreneurial field, in the position of a follower spouse. This observation can also be linked to the chronological dimension of monitoring identified in the first result. Indeed, it is possible to consider that these maternal concerns occupy a more important place in the decision-making process of the woman copreneur when she is the mother of young children and that they will diminish as the children grow up.

But the husband's career also plays a major role in the wife's position as a follower spouse ('I was a salaried employee for part of my life, but I was also a housewife because, as we moved around a lot, it was difficult for me to have a professional career in parallel with my husband's, as I had to follow him all the time' #8; 'Then, Nicolas had a career at EDF for 10 years and I, in inverted commas, was following him' #9).

These situations may appear to be from another era, as social change could be seen as mitigating the phenomenon. However, the renunciation appears regardless of the generation concerned. Mayling (case 11) is now 32 years old. She left her country at the age of 20 to follow Stéphane. Céline (case 9) was born in 1983 and was only 21 years old when she changed her course of study to accommodate the marital project. When asked about this sacrifice for her husband, she replies:

It doesn't bother me at all... On the contrary... I find this old model noble... I find it really noble... And that's also why we're in step... I've already told myself that it's an old model ... that there's still the man who has to be pampered ... we do everything to make him feel good ... but I like this role...

⁵ On the contrary, people with a strong locus of internal control believe that they can act on events and that the situations they experience result mainly from their own decisions and actions.

Finally, only cases 13 and 14 present male follower spouses. In case 13, the position of follower seems to be well assumed by the husband. He even claims it, when he states in a loud voice that it is his wife's project '100%'. As for the wife, she seems to assume the position of leader. The couple and the company have found their balance. Case 14 presents the opposite situation, as this division of roles seems to have been one of the main causes of the marital separation and the end of the co-entrepreneurship. Lisa admits: 'I shouldn't have forced him to follow me ... it wasn't him ... [...] He didn't want to'.

In the decision-making process leading to starting a business as a couple, the choice of spouse is decisive

All the results place the adherence of the follower spouse to the leader's project at the heart of the decision to become a couple. If the decision to become a copreneur implies the positioning of one spouse as a follower (often the woman) and the other as a leader (often the man) as well as the renunciation by the follower spouse of his or her own aspirations, then copreneurship seems to exist only if each partner accepts one of these roles.

In case 7, Alain explains: 'Yes, I said: that's enough, we have to make a decision'. The researcher then turns to Lydia and says: 'So, you end up accepting your husband's request...'. But Lydia replies with a loud laugh (nervous?): 'Well, I didn't have much choice! Do you know what he told me? He said: it's me or your shop!' Later in the interview, Alain explains: 'If she hadn't been by my side in the company, I wouldn't have chosen her as my wife... I think that our success, our success as a couple, was that: that she was up to the job in the company ... and that's why it worked in our relationship...'

These words may be considered unromantic, but they have the merit of frankness and the interest of providing a new avenue of research to the work on copreneurship. If, among copreneurs, marital commitment is often considered the nodal condition for entrepreneurial commitment, perhaps the reverse is also true. Perhaps the follower's acceptance of the entrepreneurial commitment largely determines the marital commitment. Perhaps the leading copreneur can, more or less consciously, only envisage entering into (or remaining in) a relationship with a partner who is willing to become the follower. Indeed, Alain's clear statement ('If she had not been by my side in the business, I would not have chosen her as my wife' #7) is far from being an isolated case, even if it is rarely expressed in such a pragmatic way.

In case 15 too, Florence relates: 'I didn't follow him ... because I wanted to keep my business ... so that was the

Table 3. Summary of results

In the decision-making process leading to starting a business as a couple	One of the spouses is the leader and the other is the follower
	There is a renunciation on the part of the follower spouse
	The positioning as a follower spouse is influenced by gender-related considerations
	The choice of spouse is decisive

Source: Own elaboration.

crisis in our relationship'. She did not 'give in' at that point, but the couple lived very far apart. After a year, they decided to get closer together by working on a new joint project.⁶

For Lisa and Mickaël (#14) the imbalance in the initial entrepreneurial will was the source of many conflicts and reproaches that negatively affected the copreneurial experience and led to the marital break-up, the sale of the business and the end of copreneurship. The pattern is exactly the same in the other case of marital separation (#12). The asymmetry in the initial commitment reappears in the day-to-day governance of the business and taints it. Reproaches abound. Opinions differ. Ambitions are not the same. The marital and copreneurial split is finally consummated.

Table 3 summarizes all the results obtained.

Discussion

The results are discussed successively. Firstly, in the decision-making process leading to entrepreneurship as a couple, one of the spouses is the leader and the other is the follower. Then there is a renunciation on the part of the follower spouse. In addition, positioning as a follower spouse is influenced by gender considerations. Finally, the choice of spouse is a major determinant in the process.

In the decision-making process leading to starting a business as a couple, one of the spouses is the leader and the other is the follower

The upstream review of the literature did not in any way suggest the positioning of one spouse as a leader and the other as a follower. Indeed, even if some works in psychology speak of individuals behaving from childhood rather as a 'leader' or rather as a 'follower' and reproducing this behavior in their adult couple relationship (Rochet, 2018), a non-verbal language between the partners that make it possible to determine whether there is a leader and a follower in the couple

⁶ New common project but involving, as always, a leader and a follower. Daniel: 'In the end, we chose to buy this château because my grandfather was a wine merchant, so I wanted to start over and reconnect with what I had experienced in my youth, going down into the cellars and take care of wine ... this project was the realization of my childhood dream...'

(Glass, 2013) or even cerebral types 'leader, follower, inspiration or observer' according to the zones of the brain most often stimulated among subjects (Kosslyn & Koenig, 1992), no academic research on copreneurship formally organizes its reasoning around the terms 'leader' and 'follower'.

Studies by Bertaux-Wiame (1982, 2004) on the particular case of couples operating bakeries, certainly highlight, in substance, several trajectories of women who have followed their spouse in their professional project, but do not propose, in terms of, analyses around the notion of 'monitoring'. Others mention, in the course of a sentence, women often in the position of 'following leader' (Gillis-Donovan & Moynihan-Bradt, 1990, p. 158) or a person who is more 'forced motor' than the other in the couple (Kaslow & Kaslow, 1992, p. 329).

But these studies are at the stage of an already existing copreneurship and none of them highlight the recurring presence of a leader and a follower, whether upstream or downstream of setting up the business. Moreover, the semantic connotation of the term 'copreneur' itself does not in any way reveal this state of affairs. Indeed, the prefix co-, from the Latin *cum* (with), indicates, according to the *Litttré*, the meeting or the addition. No distinction, particularly in terms of the level of involvement and/or importance between the parts brought together or added, is present in the signifier. Nor is there a chronological distinction. On the contrary, in certain definitions, it is the simultaneity,⁷ even the identity, the symmetry, which are put forward. This egalitarian connotation (in time, in the role, in status, etc.) of the associated parties therefore contrasts with the clear distinction between spouses that appears in our results. The same is also true on the broader subject of co-leadership since, in this area too, the literature insists above all on the need for a very egalitarian positioning of the partners, particularly to reduce conflicts (Heenan & Bennis, 1999; Nosko, 2003; Rilling & Jordan, 2007) and never refers to the vocabulary of 'leader' or 'follower'.

The first theoretical contribution of this study is therefore to show that the copreneurial project is always initiated more by one of the spouses than by the other. This specific decision-making configuration reveals a 'leader' spouse and a 'follower' spouse.

We define the 'leader' spouse as the one who initiated the copreneurial project and the 'follower' spouse as the one who joined the project initiated by the leader. Membership is understood in strict acceptance, that is to say only as the fact of joining the project. The adherence of the follower has, in this definition, no qualitative scope: it can be more or less immediate, more or less enthusiastic, more or less strong, and more or less constrained. But, for the copreneurship to be created, it is necessary that the adherence of the follower to the project of the leader has been realized, independently of any appreciation of its degree and its depth.

⁷ In that of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (dictionary of the French Academy) for example.

In the decision-making process leading to starting a business as a couple, there is a renunciation on the part of the follower spouse

It is important to emphasize that total convergence of the ideals of both spouses on absolutely all aspects of a project is rare, if not impossible. The more the elements of the project converge, the more the renunciation of the follower is minimal. They then project easily and quickly into the future, especially professional, what is proposed to them. On the other hand, adherence to the project risks being more delicate if the renunciation of one's own trajectory represents, for the follower, a greater sacrifice. Doise's theory (1993) of a progressive co-constructed decision-making process that leads the individual to regulate his reasoning and to go beyond his initial perceptions and those of Simon (1955) or Cyert and March (1963) insisting on the mechanisms of negotiation and compromise are eminently at work here. Indeed, it is not the optimal decision as envisaged in the neoclassical theory that will prevail (Charreaux, 2005; March & Simon, 1958) but rather the one corresponding to the highest possible overall utility result (Blau, 1968; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The follower in particular evaluates their choice on the basis of the values they associate with the gains and the related socio-emotional costs. The renunciation of their own trajectory places them in a position of 'steward', in the sense of Barney (1991) and Donaldson (1990). They are dedicated to the company, embodied by the leader.

However, this dedication can have consequences in terms of socio-emotional gains or costs. Firstly, in terms of socio-emotional gains, this dedication can be compared to altruism, defined by Rand (1961) as a solidarity that obliges one to sacrifice oneself for others. In the wake of business ethics and the philosophy of virtues, altruism is mainly presented as an emotional benefit. At the level of the family business, it is considered by researchers to have a positive effect on performance because it reduces conflicting relationships between individuals and increases their participation in the development of a common strategy (Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2007). At the individual level, it can be compared to oblation pleasure, linked to the satisfaction of giving (Andreoni, 1990). A spouse can therefore draw personal benefits from their altruism, notably narcissistic, when they feel how much they bring satisfaction to their partner by their devotion (Lemaire, 1979). Dedication can even allow its emitter to feel that they exist (Alter, 2010).

But renunciation can also be synonymous with significant socio-emotional costs, especially when altruism is considered by one of the protagonists as asymmetrical. However, the literature shows that the risk of falling into asymmetric altruism is greater in couple governance situations than in other governance situations (Chami, 2001)

and that asymmetric altruism has a negative impact on the performance of the family business (Hirigoyen, 2014). In the cases studied here, the tensions could be linked to the fact that some followers feel, more or less consciously, that they have given more than they have received. They then consider their spouse as their debtor. More prosaically, they say to themselves: 'With all that I have sacrificed for him/her, I deserve better than my current situation in return'.

Explanatory elements of this renunciation and the behaviors it induces can be found in Adams' equity theory (1963), which postulates that a person feeling a sense of inequity will either leave the relationship or ask for either an increase in their remuneration or a reduction in their contribution.

In the first hypothesis, it is the failure of the copreneurial enterprise.

In the second (a request for increased rewards), the success of the rebalancing will depend on the ability of the leader to meet the expectations of the follower. It should be noted that the expected rewards are often more emotional than financial. In the copreneurial context, the recognition that one spouse can express to the other is, for example, one of the key success factors (Villéger, 2016).

Case 9 is a great example of copreneurial success. Both spouses are completely fulfilled, considering themselves very happy with their situation and the company is performing very well. However, Céline gave up a lot for Nicolas, but she is at ease with this sacrifice. Perhaps Nicolas' behavior towards her has something to do with it. Throughout the interview, he constantly praises her. The emotional rewards that Céline perceives in recompense for her sacrifice then seem to balance, if not exceed, the costs of renunciation.

In the third hypothesis, the follower decreases their contribution. They disengage, which can force the leader to overinvest in the company, to compensate for the lack of involvement of their spouse, a lack of involvement that can go as far as stowaway behavior (Olson, 1971). Finally, the feeling of sometimes going it alone in a project envisaged for two can diminish the enthusiasm and the performance of the leader.

Without going so far as to feel an asymmetrical altruism, the sacrifice induced by their renunciation can also cause lasting discomfort in the follower. Anger, resentment, sadness, or regret (emotion identified by Hirigoyen and Labaki, 2012, as decisive in the decision-making process of family businesses) are all socio-emotional costs that can compromise copreneurship. The speeches of follower copreneurs also reflect a feeling of constraint, of a lack of alternatives, which is reminiscent of the term 'forced integration' used by Chell and Baines (1998) to describe the phenomenon of women who adapt their career choices to changes in the needs of the company,

sometimes by sacrificing their professional projects. Indeed, at no time did the leading spouses interviewed consider calling on someone other than their spouse to help them. Symmetrically, at no time did the follower spouses suggest that their spouse calls on someone other than themselves to help them. For the copreneurs (both leaders and followers), recourse to a person outside their couple is not envisaged because it would be almost experienced as a marital betrayal, with the related guilt for the hoped-for follower who did not follow⁸ and the attendant resentment for the hopeful leader who was forsaken.⁹ The culmination of the leader's project weighs on the shoulders of the designated follower. In case of non-follow-up, they feel responsible and guilty (in the eyes of the leader but also, and sometimes even above all, in their own eyes) for the non-realization of the dream.

In addition, the socio-emotional cost of the renunciation can be all the stronger for the following spouse if he has the impression of having been cheated.¹⁰ This is the case when the initial psychological contract (Rousseau, 2001), based on occasional help, is ultimately not respected. Several followers interviewed for this study relate to this phenomenon and thus highlight that the idea of a decisional progression of conjunctive, cumulative, and incremental entrepreneurship developed by effectuation theorists (Bérard, 2009; Sarasvathy, 2001; Silberzahn, 2016) is also at work in copreneurship.

Finally, the reduction in the socio-emotional costs of renunciation for the spouse-follower may depend on their ability to overcome the cognitive dissonance (in the sense of Festinger, 1954) that they can sometimes feel.¹¹ Cognitive dissonance creates tension, unease, which the individual tries, more or less consciously, to alleviate, in particular through cognitive distortion (Carrell & Ditttrich, 1978). They force themselves to modify their initial judgment to bring it into conformity with reality and thus better accept their situation and reduce their discomfort.

In accordance with the theories of decision-making in organization theory, this research shows that the final satisfaction of the follower spouse therefore depends largely on the utility result that they associate with their copreneurial situation, a utility result all the higher the more they are able to reduce the related costs or to estimate that they are offset by substantial gains.

⁸. Case 7: 'I still couldn't let him down and prevent him from realizing his dream'.

⁹. Case 8: 'If it worked between us, it's also because she followed me into the business. Otherwise it wouldn't have worked'.

¹⁰. Case 4: 'In the beginning, I only had to come once in a while to help out a little. And then, little by little, I had to come full time. Once you get into it, it's hard to go back, you know. People need you so you can't let them down'.

¹¹. Case 3: 'If I had really wanted to go back to my old job, I would have done it. So, well, if I stayed it was because I had to earn a living'.

In the decision-making process leading to starting a business as a couple, the positioning as a follower spouse is influenced by gender-related considerations

Moreover, in the decision-making process leading to entrepreneurship as a couple, positioning as a follower spouse is influenced by gender-related considerations. This result is corroborated by the literature.

Indeed, gender is the most determining variable of the propensity to create a business (Delmar & Davidsson, 2000). The entrepreneurial model remains centered on the male, and the female entrepreneur is seen as an exception (Ahl, 2006). In the particular case of copreneurship, a very large majority of founding couples indicate that the 'founder-leader' is the man (O'Connor et al., 2006, p. 614). It is overwhelmingly the woman who abandons her plans, showing a particularly developed resilience, which allows her to adapt and readapt to the needs of the company (Baines & Wheelock, 1998). The entrepreneurial role of women is often defined by default, secondary to that of men (Bessière & Gollac, 2007).

The 'adverse effect' of marriage on women's career performance, highlighted as early as 1977 by Heckman et al. to describe the fact that they are incentivized to put their careers second to the needs of their families and after the careers of their husbands, thus always seems to be at work among the copreneurs. Hochschild and Machung confirmed the relevance of this observation in 2012, by showing that women continue to prioritize the needs of their family over their professional aspirations. They are often torn between the career opportunities that present themselves and the strong family expectations that rest on them (Poza & Messer, 2001).

Several interpretations can be found in the literature. Firstly, Essentialist theory, initiated by Popper (1945) posits that men and women are, in essence, different. They are, of course, physically, but this physiological difference also has an influence on their aptitudes and their personal tastes. On the other hand, for social influence theorists, the behavior of an individual is influenced mainly by the expectations of the society in which they are embedded (Snyder & Stukas, 1999; Vorauer & Miller, 1997). The individual is influenced by these expectations, whether real or imaginary, by adopting behavior and/or beliefs in line with them (Bédard et al., 2006). In this vein, Bertaux-Wiame (2004, p. 21) attributes the strong propensity of female copreneurs to follow their spouse to 'a collective, individually internalized assessment of the professional dimension as a dominant imperative essential to masculine identity and secondarily declined in feminine'.

The anthropological perspective also seems able to provide some answers to the observation of the significant preeminence of women in the role of follower spouse. She highlights what Caillé (2012, p. 43) calls 'the assignment of women to

giving' or 'the giving career of women'. He explains that in the socially instituted ideal, the feminine anthropological condition is inherent in the gift. The woman gives life first. The woman then gives herself, to a man, during the sexual act in particular; but also to her children, in her educational function, the ultimate gift in terms of motherhood being ultimately 'the gift to the child of their freedom, of their ability to tear themselves away from their mother's bosom, to become in turn, no longer just a given desirable object, but the subject of a gift'. He adds that this condition 'can be interpreted as the simple effect of male violence and domination', but that would be to forget 'one of the basic data of Mauss's anthropology': the superiority of the giver over the receiver.¹² The 'followership' theory, initiated in particular by Kelley (1988), confirms this reasoning by aiming to position the 'followers', that is, those who follow the leader, as central actors in organizations, in opposition to the traditional approach placing the leader at the heart of all study hypotheses. Proponents of this theory point out that the leader cannot exist without 'followers' and that the latter are much less under the control of the leader than it seems (Kellerman, 2007; Meindl, 1995). They also believe that the follower can be as proactive as the leader (Chaleff, 1995).

And indeed, the position of follower in the decision-making process leading to copreneurship is not necessarily synonymous with a lesser power of the follower in the realization of the project and in the future governance of the company if we keep in mind that the follower is the one who holds the keys to the potential realization and continuation of the project or otherwise. In this sense, Hirigoyen and Villéger (2017) recall that even if the female copreneur most often exercises shadow governance, she is nonetheless as influential, or even more influential, than her spouse, concerning company strategies. They establish that the 'real' power is played behind the scenes and that it is the woman who subtly pulls the strings.

In the decision-making process leading to starting a business as a couple, the choice of spouse is decisive

Our results show,¹³ per the article by Bertaux-Wiame (2004, p. 18) that, for small traders and craftsmen, it is often first a question of finding the person who could participate in the realization of the future dream: 'The construction of the mode of conjugality then depends as much on professional logics as on logics relating to intimacy and private values' and 'the conjugal arrangement is nourished by the work arrangement', the

¹² It is, however, specified that this power can exist only if it is recognized in the giver by the receiver.

¹³ Case 11: 'I have always dreamed of having a restaurant with my future wife. Already as a child, I imagined myself in the kitchen and her out front serving the customers'.

break in one register or the other can weaken the whole. Bessière (2010) notes that the farmer also often imagines his future wife living with him on the farm and sharing his daily work, this configuration being often inherited from a long family tradition. The project is sometimes thought out well in advance, even before having met the spouse who could join in and occupy the place intended for them. This questions the potential correlation between the initial asymmetry in joining the project and the existence (from the outset or over time) of a project of copreneurship and, more broadly, the potential correlation between the choice of spouse and the existence of copreneurship.

The economic theory of marriage (Becker, 1973), which is part of the broader paradigm of the theory of social exchange and utility calculation of Thibaut and Kelley (1959), provides some answers. It posits that pairing is dictated by a certain 'preference theory' whereby spouses hope that marital association will offer them a higher utility outcome than celibacy.¹⁴ Addressing his daughter, a disciple of Becker, Fourçans (2006, p. 175), writes:

If you end up getting married it is because this so-called institution of marriage will allow you to reach a level of satisfaction higher than the one you would attain if you stayed single. It's only natural, admit it. And rather obvious [...]. In order to get married, the anticipated benefits of the union must therefore exceed the costs. Otherwise, what good is it? [...] And yes! Such is life for economists; if only your mother knew that!

He concludes with this exclamation because 'love is theoretically far from any calculation' (Kaufmann, 1993).

However, by taking a step back from the somewhat excessive rationality of economic jargon, the economic theory of marriage is ultimately based on two rather universal and consensual assumptions. The first is that each individual tries to maximize their well-being, that is, each individual prefers to feel happy rather than unhappy and therefore tries to make choices that make them happy. The second is that each individual tries to find a spouse who allows them to maximize their well-being, that is, each individual seeks a spouse who will bring them what they consider necessary for their happiness in terms of love, affection, security, recognition, fulfillment, self-esteem, etc. Explained in these terms, the theory may seem less controversial.

Therefore, the choice of the copreneur spouse could also respond to a logic of maximizing the overall utility of the copreneurial couple formed. Winch (1955) shows for example that 'each individual seeks the person who will give them the greatest chance of providing them with the maximum satisfaction of their needs'. In a couple, the selection of the spouse is guided by the economic advantages, but also, and above all,

socio-emotional advantages that a partner can provide (Berscheid & Regan, 2005).¹⁵ From the first encounter, there is almost invariably an assessment of the other's 'worth' as a partner and the final judgment of the other's ability to fulfill the roles that will be expected of them in the marital union plays a decisive role in the selection of the spouse (Favez, 2013).

For Lemaire (1979) also, what creates the specific mutual attraction force is essentially the unconscious perception of a common problem with simultaneously complementary ways of reacting to it in one and the other.

Thus, in the case of copreneurs, the desire of the future spouse to participate (or not) in a copreneurial adventure can be included in the account of the marital attractiveness felt.¹⁶ From the moment the leader projects himself into a possible copreneurship, they will try to assess to what extent their future spouse can contribute to the realization of their ambition. They will then judge and gauge him in order to know whether or not they will allow them to maximize the usefulness of the copreneurship envisaged. For Brannon et al. (2013), the copreneurial association is based on the human capital that we detect in the other.¹⁷ In this sense, it seems possible to speak of the 'strategic choice of the copreneur spouse' and even to consider that the choice of the 'right' partner ultimately represents the first strategic decision of the future copreneurial company. If it is often estimated that, in the couple, when the romance disappears, there remain the accounts, it seems possible to reverse the hypothesis and to consider that, among the copreneurs, the romance only appears if the accounts are there favorable.

Conclusion

The genesis of the decision to start a business as a couple has not been explored in the literature. This article shows that it nevertheless responds to a recurring and socially embedded process that goes beyond a logic of simple economic optimization. Indeed, in the decision-making process leading to entrepreneurship as a couple, each of the spouses positions themselves as follows. Firstly, it is necessarily one of the two spouses who initiates the project. The initiator becomes the

¹⁵ Case 7: 'She calms me down a lot. We are complementary because I tend to go for it, to take risks. She calms me down and tempers my enthusiasm. She is more composed than me'.

¹⁶ Case 7: 'If she hadn't been by my side in the company, I wouldn't have chosen her as my wife... I believe that our success, our success as a couple, has been exactly that: that she was up to the task in the company ... and that's why it worked in our relationship...'

¹⁷ It should be noted that all of these studies speak of the formation of the couple in general and therefore do not refer to the distinction between 'leading spouse/following spouse'. The reasoning presented here from the point of view of the leader therefore also applies to the follower, who also performs a utility calculation in the choice of their future spouse and their related future professional situation.

¹⁴ Case 14: 'What I liked about her was that she only gave me more'.

'leader', while the other positions themselves, more or less voluntarily, as a 'follower'. Then, this decision-making scheme induces a renunciation on the part of the follower; the roles of 'leader' and 'follower' being largely determined according to gender. Finally, there is a correlation between this pre-installation configuration and the choice of partner.

All of these reflections could lead to questioning later as regards the influence of the decision-making process of entering into copreneurship on the future governance of the company. Indeed, the literature repeatedly insists on the necessity, for the success of the company, of the sharing of a common vision between the spouses regarding the organization of the copreneurship (Baines & Wheelock, 1998; Blenkinsopp & Owens, 2010; Chyi-Lyi & Dunn, 2009; Danes & Olson, 2003; Jang & Danes, 2013; Kadis & McClendon, 1991; Ponthieu & Caudill, 1993; Van Auken & Werbel, 2006). Therefore, would the position of follower of one of the spouses, generated and accepted upstream of the installation, not be a factor influencing the future performance of the company?

If the spouses do not participate in the same way in the decision-making process of entering the copreneurship, their levels of involvement in the company, resistance to difficulties, or personal fulfillment could subsequently differ. The distribution of roles and power could also be affected. Indeed, in the copreneurial company, formal power is overwhelmingly held by men, while informal power is held by women (Hirigoyen & Villéger, 2017). The position of the follower of the woman copreneur during the installation could be one of the explanatory factors of this configuration of governance. From the moment the woman is not the initiator of the project, it then seems less obvious for her to position herself as the main leader in the company. Further research could therefore focus on the possible link between the position of the leader during the installation project and the position of leader in the copreneurial company.

In this context, the question of the influence of the legal form chosen for the company and the distribution of capital between the spouses on their behavior remains a potentially rich line of thought to be explored. Is there a correlation between capital distribution and positioning in the roles of 'leader' and 'follower'? Does the legal form chosen have an impact on the involvement and respective roles of the spouses?

The level of innovation of the company could also be a significant variable. Perhaps, for example, partner buy-in is more difficult to obtain in the case of innovative start-ups, where the failure rate is reputed to be high and the necessary skills specific. A later study could also focus more specifically on the profile of the respondents by asking whether the level of education and income influences the process of entry into joint ventures, as examined here.

Another avenue of research not explored to date would consist of analyzing the situations of refusal to enter into copreneurship, their causes, and their consequences, both at the level of the

leading spouse and of the spouse approached to become a follower. What are the reasons that led the prospective follower to refuse the partnership? Was the refusal to follow the leader synonymous with marital breakdown? Did the leader still start alone or with another partner; marital or not? What were the consequences of this new configuration of governance?

By broadening the field of investigations, it would also be interesting to question the existence of the phenomenon of leader/follower in other entrepreneurial dyads. For example, does this positioning appear in the case of friends becoming business associates? If so, is it exactly the same as the one described in this article or is it possible to update certain specificities depending on the bond (marital, friendly, family, financial, etc.) that unites the two people?

Finally, for copreneur practitioners, this article can allow them to situate themselves in a recurring interactional scheme and lead them to a better understanding of the decision-making mechanisms to which they are subject. It can also lead them to feel less isolated, or even reassured, in the face of the significance of their situation. Finally, it offers them the possibility of understanding the dynamics (positive or negative) linked to their situation in a new light since the cursor is shifted to a period prior to the installation, a period revealing a new face of the analytical kaleidoscope of copreneurial governance and confirming the thesis of Girard (1964, p. 9) in his works on love relationships when he affirms: 'Lightning, when it strikes, does not strike just anywhere'.

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Appendices

Appendix I. Excerpts from the coding and analysis grids for cases 1 to 4

Case	Timing	Verbatims	Leader	Follower
#1	✓	<p>Michel: In fact, when I came to the Air Ministry, I wanted to fly in the air but they didn't make me do it. It was routine and I didn't have to give it my all. I had the impression of not surpassing myself and me, what I wanted was to surpass myself. I was fed up, I wanted to work for myself and earn more. I have always had an entrepreneurial spirit. I didn't want to settle for less. So I quit.</p> <p><i>And you, Mrs ?</i></p> <p>Andrée: For me it was the opposite. I was fine at the Air Ministry. I would have preferred to stay there. We lived in Meudon, it was good. And then, there was no pressure, we played belote, we hid the cards in the office when someone knocked on the door. I would have liked to continue this life. Michel wanted to create his own company for a long time but I would have lived an easier and quieter life if I had stayed at the Air Ministry...</p> <p>Michel: yes, but you followed me anyway...</p> <p>Andrée: yes, but it didn't come much, you know... because it's not easy to go from life in Paris to a small village in Charente! It really was a lost hole! I had to get used to it... I remember his mother saying to him: "you, Michel, you are an adventurer". But that's not why she really approved. She might have liked him to take a little less risk and that we would quietly remain civil servants. Me too by the way...</p>	Michel	Andrée
#2	✓	<p>Valérie: When Mathilde was born, I worked in a chartered accountant firm. But it was not easy to manage the children and the job. In my husband's company, there was a part-time employee who had to leave and at that time we were outsourcing a large part of the accounting and the company was growing... Suddenly, my husband told me "we maybe you could create a full-time accountant position and you'd come and work with me in the company". He asked the advice of his father, who said ok, and it happened like that...</p> <p><i>Did you hesitate?</i></p> <p>Valérie: Yes, for three reasons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I was losing all my contact with customers and wondering if I was going to be bored all alone in an office doing nothing but accounting all day. 2. I lost my clients to whom I was attached, for some I knew their whole life, I had followed them for 15 years, they had seen me pregnant, I knew their children, I was invited to their wedding... 3. I asked myself the question of the agreement with my father-in-law. He has a strong character. He's a character. But I too have character and I say what I think. And in the end, that's what made it go well... [...] <p>Loïc: if tomorrow morning I had to set up another company, it would be with her too...</p> <p><i>Does that mean you are planning to start another business?</i></p> <p>Loïc: it's true that today I wonder if I'm going to do this all my life... one of my dreams was to run a restaurant... but hey... we'll see..</p> <p>Valérie: anyway, I am my job is to do the accounts and manage employees... so I know how to do that... afterwards, whether the employees do painting or cooking, me, it doesn't change much for me... I adapt... so it's him who sees, it will be his project but I will follow him knowing that, when I worked in the accounting firm, I had clients who were butchers - butchers, bakers, hairdressers... so it's the same... it's like a salesperson... he has the tools to sell and then he adapts according to the type of sale so I'll definitely follow him...</p>	Loïc	Valérie
#3	✓	<p>Henri has not arrived yet so we start the interview with Vivianne. She makes us sit in the "boss's" office, as she puts it. She brings an extra chair which she puts on the side of the desk. She sits there. The big black leather armchair "the boss" therefore remains empty on the other side of the desk, facing us. This particular positioning challenges us and therefore makes us deviate from the interview guide initially planned.</p> <p><i>We begin the interview as follows:</i></p> <p><i>Why don't you sit behind the desk, and in your husband's chair?</i></p> <p>Vivianne: Oh no! I would not allow myself! But that's normal. I followed my husband. he's the boss! [...]</p> <p><i>Can you tell me the story of the creation of your company?</i></p> <p>Vivianne: it was my husband who, one day, wanted to be the boss... on his own... without being directed... He worked at the Ford factory... and then one day he said to himself: "I'm going to set up on my own" ... but I was a nurse...</p> <p><i>Ok, so at first you kept your job as a nurse?</i></p> <p>Vivianne: yes... yes... I really liked my job you know... a lot... I kept it until 81, then we had our second daughter and there, I had the right, as I was 40 km away from Bordeaux, to take 10 years of availability... the only thing is that I had to write a letter every year to extend for a year... and then, well, the company grew... one day I forgot to renew and they crossed out my cards... it happened like that...</p> <p><i>So that was done "naturally"... there was not, one day, a precise decision...</i></p> <p>Vivianne: no... no... because I really liked my job but well..... (long hesitation)..... well, I'm not going to tell you everything but... well let's say yes, I followed him..... (long hesitation) If I had wanted to go back to my job, I would have done it... so good... it's because I had to find my account... and then good, my husband and my children needed me...</p>	Henri	Vivianne

Yes, in your mind, it was you who followed him, it was his project...

Vivianne: yes, even if I have to admit that I didn't agree at the start... because when you go from an executive salary to... an installation... it was still difficult... you know, I have my feet on earth, I'm a country girl, there was my salary from the company but hey... I was giving up some security... it was much more adventurous... so I didn't like it too much...

So initially you did not support him...

Vivianne: Not at first no... that's for sure... because in addition for one or two years the time to get things going, it was still difficult...

Did you have any regrets about your job as a nurse?

Vivianne: well, let's say that it happened gradually... because at first I stopped working not for the company but to take care of my children... so it happened like that... but gradually... very gradually... I was recruited (laughing)... but if I had really wanted to go back, I could have...

And your husband wouldn't have said anything if you had wanted to return to your nursing profession? Do you think he would have accepted this choice?

Vivianne: yes I think so... well, I never asked her the question...

And you, haven't you asked yourself the question?

Vivianne: Oh yes! Yes, I asked myself...

But you didn't tell him...

Vivianne: no... but well, in fact I still took pleasure in what I was doing... me, at 20 I said: "never behind a desk" and in fact I spent half my life there... [...]

And you, sir, what would you say your wife brought you? What was his strength?

Henri: (she followed) and she didn't ask questions... that was her strength... her strength is that she didn't put a spoke in my wheels... [...]

Did you both agree to sell? It can happen that one of the two is not...

Vivianne: I've always followed him... why do you want me to stop following him now! Yes... yes... of course I agreed with him...

#4

Océane: ...it's because I had heart problems... so getting up at 4 a.m. to go and manage 30 men is not ideal... so my husband Jean-Luc Océane said to me: "you're going to close this box"... me, I liked my box... and then it worked very well... but it's true that if I had continued like that, I might not be here today... we had to At the time, an accounting secretary who we managed together. I had it for my company and he for his. She was of retirement age. He said to me: "we are going to retire Mireille and you are going to do a little training and you are going to take care of all the administration and you are going to replace Mireille"... so I closed my business and I followed...

Notes: The lexical field of the follow-up is highlighted in the ellipses. The 'Timing' column makes it possible to visualize the cases where the reference to follow-up occurs within the first five minutes of the interview. The shaded passages reveal the lexical fields related to renunciation, sacrifice, will (or non-will) as well as emotional connotations.

Source: Own elaboration.