

Introduction

Late 20th-century family sociology is faced with new and interesting challenges related to intimate realities barely known half a century ago. Society swarms with unfamiliar social manners and life forms such as *TINS*-couples (two incomes, no sex), *DINK*-couples (double income, no kids), *LAT*-relations and the *new man*. However, more familiar social models such as marriage continue to arouse family researchers' interest, the more so since marital relationships are increasingly prone to failure. This proneness is due to macro-level shifts such as the expansion of the welfare state, individualization and the emancipation of women, turning marriage into a risky business. The socially prescribed 'ought' to marry, as well as to stay married, has lost its compelling character. Hence, we do not only marry less and later but also get divorced more and earlier. The normative uncertainty ensuing from this behavior makes our intimate relationships less predictable and more diverse than ever (Cheal, 1991).

For some, this self-ruled private scenery is not only the most in-depth social change of the past decades but also the most problematic one. Prophets of doom such as Popenoe (1993) even identify this private turmoil as a 'great disruption' or a 'dramatic change'. Intimate partners are suspected of enforced hedonism, turning them into economical utility calculators weighing up self-interests and desires against the costs and rewards offered by a marital relationship. Others, such as Cheal (1991) and van Stokkom (1997), refute this cultural pessimism and interpret the same evolution as a process of *re*-integration instead of *de*-integration and even as moral progress. It is striking, though, that both logics revolve around the same issue of *relationship quality* and *satisfaction*. While some argue that the quality of partnership has considerably deteriorated, others put forward exactly the reverse argumentation, emphasizing partners' motivation to develop satisfying marriages. This puzzlement poses the question whether marital quality has actually changed during the past decades. The answer, however, is not obvious since several and diverse social transformations all clot together in individuals' personal experiences. Positive and negative social forces might largely offset one another as well, resulting in apparent

stable marital quality throughout time while actually considerable changes have been taken place. In fact, asking the question about changes in marital quality may be irrelevant because of the risk to judge past reality according to current standards and vice versa.

Nevertheless, the present circumstances in many Western countries attest to a vulnerable marital institution. More than ever in history, the survival of marriage seems to depend on the *quality* and *satisfaction* it can offer for the parties involved. Therefore, the question as why some partners are more satisfied with their marriage than others became increasingly significant in light of the profound social and cultural transformations of the past century. If the degree of satisfaction with one's partnership is indeed substantial and even of utmost importance in partners' legitimation of partnership, gaining insight in this evaluation criterion is vital for understanding the nature of contemporary marital bounds.

The present study aims to contribute to this understanding by examining spousal marital satisfaction in the Netherlands. Although an overwhelming body of research on marital satisfaction and its determinants exists, our knowledge on this theme is primarily based on American studies. For the Netherlands, however, this field is still unexplored. Moreover, previous studies leave important questions unaddressed as to long-term associations, spillover effects, and the different manifestations of marital experiences in higher and lower social groups. Therefore, the *central aim* of this study is to examine the underlying processes and correlates of Dutch spouses' satisfaction with marriage, about 40 years after the onset of the so-called second demographic transition. The latter term is usually reserved for referring to the interlinked demographic developments observed in Western Europe in the sixties and seventies (Lesthaeghe & Van de Kaa, 1986; Van de Kaa, 2001), resulting in both external and internal transformations of partnership.

For our research purpose, data of a Dutch longitudinal project "Family and Child-Rearing in the Netherlands" (Gerris et al., 1992; 1993; 1998) is used. Husbands and wives included in this project are generally born at the end of World War II. Thus, the present study is directed towards a specific social group, i.e. the pioneers of the current demographic conditions. It was the baby boom generation, born between 1940 and 1955, and socialized with the ideal type of the nuclear family, that instigated enormous quantita-

tive and qualitative changes in the private sphere. Hence, this generation has inherited a whole other private story than the one they would write down themselves. This experience might have important sociological consequences for the intimate relations this generation would develop later in their life. Actually, they were a generation confronted with *old realities* and *new ideals*. Precisely this tension makes the study of their marital experiences very interesting.

The work presented here is a collection of the studies that were conducted over the past four years on the determinants and processes underlying marital satisfaction. Three major parts are distinguished.

Part I is conceived as the societal background and scientific impetus of the present study. By drawing attention to the broader social context fueling the micro-level experiences of husbands and wives, the social significance of a micro-sociological phenomenon like marital satisfaction is clarified. In particular, attention is drawn to the Dutch context. Part I also discusses the theoretical and methodological background of the present study and the distinct research questions formulated to gain insight in Dutch husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction. This part is concluded with a description of the data, the sampling procedure and the validation of the sample.

Part II of this study consists of six chapters. Each chapter addresses a particular research question on marital satisfaction covering four broad themes: gender, communication, parenting and, spousal social and cultural position. Since an attempt was made to preserve the possibility that each chapter can be read on its own, some degree of repetition inevitably exists. The overlap predominantly concerns the description of the method and the theories that are applied. Doing so, the reader can choose a chapter of interest without lacking information already addressed in another chapter.

Part III of the present study summarizes the key findings of individual chapters and endeavors to go beyond these findings in order to arrive at a broader reconsideration of research results. The different studies are also evaluated in terms of the theoretical approaches and methodology used. To conclude, future directions for research are delineated.